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SELECTED LITERARY ESSAYS FROM JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

WITH INTRODUCTION BY

WILL DAVID HOWE
Professor of English in Indiana University

and

NORMAN FOERSTER
Associate Professor of English in the University of North Carolina

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INTRODUCTION

I. LOWELL'S LIFE AND PERSONALITY

"ONE is sometimes asked by young men to recommend to them a course of reading. My advice would always be to confine yourself to the supreme books in whatever literature; still better, to choose one great author and grow thoroughly familiar with him. For as all roads lead to Rome, so they all likewise lead hence; and you will find that in order to understand perfectly and weigh exactly any really vital piece of literature, you will be gradually and pleasantly persuaded to studies and explorations of which you little dreamed when you began and will find yourselves scholars before you are aware."

Thus spoke Lowell, the reader, professor, and man of letters. This was his advice in his day and serves as well in our time, when there are so many books and so few good readers. How well he followed his own teaching may be seen by watching him grow from early childhood to advanced maturity. His life was one long search for the "supreme books," one quest for a deeper familiarity with the "really vital pieces of literature."

James Russell Lowell was born in Cambridge within the shadow of Harvard University at a time when America was breaking the soil for a new intellectual and spiritual life. In his veins flowed the blood of one

of the best New England families, mingled with the romantic Celtic strain of his mother, a descendant from the Spence family which liked to trace its ancestry back to the old hero, Sir Patrick Spens. From the lips of his mother, Lowell listened with delight to the reciting and singing of the old ballads. In his father's library he was surrounded by books which had been gathered through many years by a family that read the best that New England could afford.

He completed the course at Harvard. He won little distinction as a scholar in the classroom, but was developed exceptionally by his "browsing" among the volumes of the library. If we glance at the list of books which he drew from the library in his college days, we observe the same eagerness which characterized the enthusiastic reader of later years. There was in him something of the curiosity which in the period of the European Renaissance inspired men to discover the books of the classic past just as our pioneer forefathers gave their lives to the discovery of new lands and new riches. Lowell was always led by this same romantic curiosity in his wandering in "the realms of gold."

Having come to the end of his college course, young Lowell tried to find himself in the professions of law and medicine and in business, but the old love of books ever drew him on. Happily for him he resolved to make a new start by writing verse. At this time Maria White came into his life, an unusual young woman of strong radical mind who encouraged him in his idealism. Under her sympathetic inspiration he wrote his first poetry which showed a serious-

ness of purpose and a sincere devotion to the best ideals of his country. So began the career of Lowell the poet.

In 1855 he was appointed to the professorship of Belles-Lettres at Harvard, to the same chair which had been occupied with distinction by Ticknor and Longfellow. While serving the University he was first selected to be Minister to Spain and later advanced to the Court of St. James. All these positions he filled with marked success. During this span of thirty years (1855 to 1885) it was possible for him to devote himself to his reading and to inspire young students with an enthusiasm for great books and to mingle with men of letters who read widely and sympathetically. He was able to develop and cherish a taste and appreciation of the great literatures to a degree which is rare among men.

In every way in which Lowell expressed himself he was the same likable man of fine sense and of genuine virility. In his excellent biography of Lowell, Mr. Greenslet writes: "Lowell had a way of uttering a good thing in talk, then jotting it down in his notebook, then writing it to a correspondent, and then using it, a little filed and polished, in whatever he happened to be composing at the time. One has in consequence a marked sense of parallelism in thought and phrase in the three modes of his prose expression." His lectures to his students at Harvard, his letters to his many friends, his political and literary essays, all reflected delightfully the same human interest which made him a likable man. Leslie Stephen once wrote of his "unmixed kindliness and thorough

wholesomeness of nature." The better we know him the more we like him. His common sense, whimsical humor, genuine interest in affairs of the day, his undaunted faith in men, — these saved him from mere bookishness. He was too human, too much a social being to be a recluse. That he knew the world at its best and cherished the highest ideals for his country, our people learned when they trusted to him the most delicate diplomatic questions in Madrid and in London.

The volumes bearing the titles *Among my Books*, *My Study Windows*, *Literary Essays*, contain his more formal criticism on the reading which ran through his life. These titles are characteristic of their author. Lowell read good books, talked about good books, wrote to his friends about good books, inspired his students to read good books, and has left us the best things said in America about the good books of the world literatures. He read widely, preferring the authors of modern literature rather than those of classic times. He liked to read authors through with the purpose of discovering the unity in their work. Thus he found that Carlyle fell short of being a very great author because he did not reveal this unity; Dante was one of the greatest writers because his work was a perfect reflection of the man himself. So he was always reading books from the human point of view.

It was fortunate for America in the middle of the nineteenth century that our leading university was represented by a teacher who was so thoroughly American in all his political and literary ideals, who set for himself the task of interesting the young nation in the great authors of literature, and not by one who exalted the

ephemeral literature of his own country chiefly because it was American. Nor was he interested in mere technique or in any timely or bizarre expression. He was content to point to the great lights whose shining had not grown dim with the centuries. Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Lessing, Rousseau, Carlyle, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Emerson, — these were the writers who had made literature, and literature stood to him as the "great exponent of all that was permanent in the human spirit." No one could go far astray who inspired his readers to know more of these masters.

In the passing years as we come to look upon Franklin, Emerson, Whittier, Lincoln, Whitman, Mark Twain, and others as representing in this way or in that way the spirit of America, we shall not soon forget the lasting service rendered to our higher life by the idealism of our most distinguished American man of letters.

II. LOWELL AS A LITERARY CRITIC

In a letter to Miss Barrett, Robert Browning referred, with just amusement, to "the very air of a Columbus" that Lowell betrayed in his earliest critical writing. This naïveté, though it diminished as Lowell's faculties ripened, was always characteristic of his criticism, and is, indeed, one of its main charms. To his countrymen, who were in Lowell's day flushed with the surprise and excitement of their share of the Romantic Movement, Lowell *was* a Columbus, because the literatures of the Old World, which he more than any other brought within their ken, were to them vir-

tually a New World of delight and inspiration. He was the foremost critic and humanist of our New England Renaissance; he wrote for those who had little, if any, acquaintance with either critical traditions or the poets and dramatists who to him were the brightest of the fixed stars. With a boundless enthusiasm for the finest things in literature, and with hardly a rival in the field of interpretative criticism, he made an extraordinary impression upon his own and the succeeding generation. Historically, his criticism is of the first importance.

But to his readers in the twentieth century, Lowell's criticism depends, for its interest and value, on its absolute excellences; we shall find it preferable to study, not so much its historic significance as its merits and demerits as literary criticism.

What strikes us from beginning to end in the reading of Lowell's writing on literature is the fact that it is primarily the criticism, not of a literary critic, but of an insatiable and excellent reader. He read incessantly; his library at Elmwood was a place consecrated to communion with the highest minds of literature. He knew the classics, and read fluently French, German, Spanish, and Italian. Dante, Cervantes, Calderon, Chaucer, and Shakespeare he studied untiringly. He could read for incredible stretches of hours, and he carried the literary point of view with him wherever he went. He responded immediately and abundantly to excellence wherever he found it; with an unerring instinct he could find the delectable spots in the uneven fields of Dryden and the correct gardens of Pope, and like Lamb, he could relish a book that the uncharitable world pronounced stupid. Though he wrote,

"Books are good dry forage; we can keep alive on them; but, after all, men are the only fresh pasture"; and though in practice he was never the mere bookworm, he unquestionably suffered from what De Quincey called "the gluttony of books." In "A Moosehead Journal," he remarked, "how tyrannical the habit of reading is, and what shifts we make to escape thinking." There is an instructive relation between his manner of writing a critical essay and the result. He annotated as he read, for lecture-room purposes; it was his habit, he tells us more than once, to review all that a man wrote just before criticizing his work, and while re-reading, he doubtless annotated more amply; then he gathered and elaborated his material, and presto! an essay was ready for the public. The processes of reflection, of arrangement of material, and of development of ideas had but scant attraction for him; in one of his commonplace books is this characteristic entry: "'T is only while we are forming our opinions that we are very anxious to propagate them." As a consequence, his essays are sometimes perfunctory, and, but for his irrepressible cleverness and his intermittent response to the demands of the subject, some of them would have been dull. He was first of all a reader, an enjoyer of books: he was almost — to use an epithet that he bestowed upon Cotton Mather — "book-suffocated." His mind, though alert, was not by nature reflective. He had no insistent desire to search for standards of criticism or life; his writing, rich in many ways, is poor in ideas; he is not interested in points of view, in hilltop surveys, but rather in the engaging or imaginatively startling detail.

Lowell's criticism, then, is quite unphilosophic; is, indeed, little more than so much random comment. But what comment! how diverting, and pungent, and healthy, and true, and human, and (on occasion) solemnizing! If he wanted the poise, the symmetry, and the unity of purpose characteristic of Arnold (of whom he wrote, "clear and cold as a critique of Matt Arnold's"), if he was too rarely "clear and cold" himself, he made up for his defects in a fashion by writing with a warmth, a never-failing gusto, and sometimes a veneration, that are communicated to the reader by the contagion of a large nature. His view of the art of criticism — "the higher wisdom of criticism lies in the capacity to admire" — is the one-sided romantic view which the better critics of our own day have wisely abjured; but whatever we may think of the view, Lowell was surely a noble exemplar of it, partly because his admiration was almost uniformly deserved by its object, and partly because he could admire greatly as well as profusely.

It is significant that Lowell's best critical essays, such as the "Chaucer," or "Shakespeare Once More," or the extended study of "Dante," deal with the greatest writers. They put him on his mettle, evoked in its fulness that power of wise admiration and sympathy which needed to be roused if he was to do his best writing. The "Dante" essay, which to some of its readers seems disappointing as the result of twenty years' intimate study, is, whatever its shortcomings, written in an atmosphere of calm spiritual elevation which many more original and speculative critics never breathe, and which Lowell himself rarely breathed

unless in the company of serene spirits. Here is a typical passage: —

"Dante's ideal of life, the enlightening and strengthening of that native instinct of the soul which leads it to strive backward toward its divine source, may sublimate the senses till each becomes a window for the light of truth and the splendor of God to shine through. In him as in Calderon the perpetual presence of imagination not only glorifies the philosophy of life and the science of theology, but idealizes both in symbols of material beauty. Though Dante's conception of the highest end of man was that he should climb through every phase of human experience to that transcendental and supersensual region where the true, the good, and the beautiful blend in the white light of God, yet the prism of his imagination forever resolved the ray into color again, and he loved to show it also where, entangled and obstructed in matter, it became beautiful once more to the eye of sense."

The invariable tokens of genius which Lowell found in Dante and Shakespeare as well as in Homer and Æschylus were, first, "fatally-chosen words," secondly, "the simplicity of consummate art," thirdly, an "harmonious whole," and fourthly, a "happy mixture and proportion" of the qualities of artistic work (imagination, the most important, supported by its "less showy and more substantial allies"). Although he nowhere brings together these various essentials of great art, and although the first two seemed to mean more to him than the second two, one is doubtless justified in saying that these are almost constantly the bases for his critical opinions. When,

for example, in the essay on Carlyle, he speaks of Goethe as "the last of the *great* poets," the characteristics of genius mentioned above are implied in the epithet he italicizes.

These traits of the highest type of art are obviously found more frequently in the classical literatures of Greece and Rome than in modern literatures, so that one might expect Lowell's sympathies to lie with the former rather than the latter. But Lowell had not the classical spirit — he preferred painting to sculpture, the mediæval cathedral to the Greek temple, and in general Gothic art to classic art. His favorite poets were not Homer, Sophocles, and Virgil, but, no doubt, Dante, Shakespeare, and Calderon. It is true that in his address on "The Study of Modern Languages" the undertone is one of instinctive allegiance — partly conventional and partly personal — to the ancient literatures; but in this address he seems to be combating, as he did rather often, a "secret partiality." His list of the illustrious writers in "the literature of the last three centuries" — Dante, Machiavelli, Montaigne, Bacon, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Pascal, Calderon, Lessing, and Goethe — contains more names that were dear to him than would any list of ten classical writers. In the Battle of the Books he would probably have fought lustily for the cause of the ancients, yet one suspects that his heart would have been with the moderns.

But this is not to say that Lowell's sympathies were with romanticism. Petrarch he usually credits with being the inventor of "romance and sentiment — in other words, the pretense of feeling what we do not

feel," and as Petrarch's followers he includes Rousseau, Chateaubriand, Lamartine, Byron, — in fact, almost all who come after Rousseau in point of time. It is true that Lowell himself, in his youth, passed through a period of romantic melancholy, and to the end, one cannot help feeling, nursed in secret a wild spark of romance which he would neither fan into flame nor forcibly quench. It may be fanciful to suppose that this is why he was attracted to Dryden and wrote so well about him — Dryden, whose poetical enthusiasm was chilled, as Lowell pointed out, by the skeptical atmosphere of his age. At all events, Lowell was but ill at ease in the currents of thought that prevailed in the nineteenth century. Despite his Tory nature, he welcomed the spirit and doctrine of democracy bravely; but evolutionary science ("I hate it," he wrote in a letter, "as a savage does writing") and the introspection of romanticism (the "melancholy liver-complaint" of "our self-exploiting nineteenth century") perplexed him sorely, and caused him to seek, with the more earnestness, the hearty good-fellowship of Chaucer and the serene presence of Shakespeare.

What Lowell lost in his criticism through allowing it to be random comment, he well-nigh made up through his astonishing power of expression. Whatever entered his mind, this he expressed or could express. His literary essays and his classroom talk are of a piece, so that what Professor Barrett Wendell, one of his pupils in the famous Dante course, says of his talk applies well enough to his essays: "Now and again, some word or some passage would suggest to him a line of thought — sometimes very earnest, some-

times paradoxically comical — that it would never have suggested to any one else. And he would lean back in his chair, and talk away across country till he felt like stopping; or he would thrust his hands into the pockets of his rather shabby sack-coat, and pace the end of the room with his heavy laced boots, and look at nothing in particular, and discourse of things in general." Those hours in the course on Dante many men still living carry about with them as an imperishable possession. What made them memorable is mainly Lowell's character, Lowell the man, from whom it would be hard to separate the fertility and readiness and aptness of his power of expression. His pages, like his talk, are sprinkled with engaging turns of phrase, quotable epigrams, figures of extraordinary "patness," and all these are borne on a swift current of speech that deepens and darkens here and sparkles over pebbles there, but that never recognizes impediment.

To watch for the clever phrases and passages while one is carried forward rapidly by the irresistible tide of his style, is perhaps not the most elevating pursuit conceivable, but it has an excuse in the excellent quality of Lowell's cleverness. There are two kinds of cleverness: the first, cheap cleverness, bears the relation to the second, genuine cleverness, which melodrama bears to tragedy. Just as melodrama offers thrills for their own sake, while the thrills of tragedy are inevitable, so cheap cleverness delights in producing clever effects, while genuine cleverness produces them because it cannot help it. Lowell's cleverness is of the latter kind; his happy expressions give one the

feeling that they came unsought, that they arranged themselves spontaneously. Here are a few from the first volume of his collected prose works: —

" . . . one of those naked pigs that seem rushing out of market-doors in winter, frozen in a ghastly attitude of gallop."

[Of the dramatist Webster:] "His nature had something of the sleuth-hound quality in it, and a plot, to keep his mind eager on the trail, must be sprinkled with fresh blood at every turn. . . . He has not the condensing power of Shakespeare, who squeezed meaning into a phrase with an hydraulic press, but he could carve a cherry-stone with any of the *concettisti*. . . ."

[Of Emerson:] "His eye for a fine, telling phrase that will carry true is like that of a backwoodsman for a rifle; and he will dredge you up a choice word from the mud of Cotton Mather himself." His diction "is like homespun cloth-of-gold." Of a disjointed lecture: "It was as if, after vainly trying to get his paragraphs into sequence and order, he had at last tried the desperate expedient of *shuffling* them. It was chaos come again, but it was a chaos full of shooting-stars. . . ."

Such things as those — and one could find still better examples in the other volumes — would repay the reading of many a pedestrian page, if there were any such in Lowell. But there are not. First of all, his writing is entertaining — one can read him in the most languid hour; secondly, it is inspiring. If the entertainment is ere long forgotten, the inspiration, having recruited our spiritual faculties, abides indefinitely.

Since Lowell's death, and the death of many of

those who came under the spell of his charming and vigorous personality, his reputation as a literary critic has suffered a slight decline. The decline was inevitable, since in his later years he was somewhat overrated, and since until a few years ago no one had undertaken to expose his unquestionably grave defects as a literary critic. Now that his defects — his lack of plan and of purpose, in particular — are clearly understood, we may dwell upon his excellences, and be grateful for them, without danger of exaggeration. As rambling essays on literature rather than deliberate critical estimates, they are among the few of their kind in the whole range of English literature that have survived, and they may confidently be expected to outlive the more orderly, more solid, but less impressive works of critics whom only critics care to read. Generous, brilliant, and wise, his conversations on literature will ever be our resort when our own unaided light seems dim and unprofitable.

LITERARY ESSAYS

CHAUCER

1870

"And ay the morē he was in despair
The more he coveted and thought her fair;
His blindē lust was all his coveting.
On morrow when the bird began to sing
Unto the siege he cometh full privily
And by himself he walketh soberly
The imáge of her recording alway new:
Thus lay her hair, and thus fresh was her hue,
Thus sate, thus spake, thus span, this was her cheer,
Thus fair she was, and this was her manére.
All this conceit his heart hath new ytake,
And as the sea, with tempest all toshake,
That after, when the storm is all ago,
Yet will the water quap a day or two,
Right so, though that her formē were absént
The pleasance of her forme was presént."

THIS passage leads me to say a few words of Chaucer as a descriptive poet; for I think it a great mistake to attribute to him any properly dramatic power, as some have done. Even Herr

Hertzberg, in his remarkably intelligent essay, is led a little astray on this point by his enthusiasm. Chaucer is a great narrative poet; and, in this species of poetry, though the author's personality should never be obtruded, it yet unconsciously pervades the whole, and communicates an individual quality, — a kind of flavor of its own. This very quality, and it is one of the highest in its way and place, would be fatal to all dramatic force. The narrative poet is occupied with his characters as picture, with their grouping, even their costume, it may be, and he feels for and with them instead of being they for the moment, as the dramatist must always be. The story-teller must possess the situation perfectly in all its details, while the imagination of the dramatist must be possessed and mastered by it. The latter puts before us the very passion or emotion itself in its utmost intensity; the former gives them, not in their primary form, but in that derivative one which they have acquired by passing through his own mind and being modified by his reflection. The deepest pathos of the drama, like the quiet "no more but so?" with which Shakespeare tells us that Ophelia's heart is bursting, is sudden as a stab, while in narrative it is more or less suffused with pity, — a feeling capable of prolonged sustention. This presence of the author's own sympathy is noticeable in all Chaucer's pathetic

passages, as, for instance, in the lamentation of Constance over her child in the "Man of Law's Tale." When he comes to the sorrow of his story, he seems to croon over his thoughts, to soothe them and dwell upon them with a kind of pleased compassion, as a child treats a wounded bird which he fears to grasp too tightly, and yet cannot make up his heart wholly to let go. It is true also of his humor that it pervades his comic tales like sunshine, and never dazzles the attention by a sudden flash. Sometimes he brings it in parenthetically, and insinuates a sarcasm so slyly as almost to slip by without our notice, as where he satirizes provincialism by the cock who

> "By nature knew ech ascensioun
> Of equinoxial in thilke toun."

Sometimes he turns round upon himself and smiles at a trip he has made into fine writing: —

> "Till that the brightë sun had lost his hue,
> For th' orisont had reft the sun his light
> (This is as much to sayen as 'it was night')."

Nay, sometimes it twinkles roguishly through his very tears, as in the

> "'Why wouldest thou be dead,' these women cry,
> 'Thou haddest gold enough — and Emily?'" —

that follows so close upon the profoundly tender despair of Arcite's farewell: —

"What is this world? What asken men to have?
Now with his love now in the coldë grave
Alone withouten any company!"

The power of diffusion without being diffuse would seem to be the highest merit of narration, giving it that easy flow which is so delightful. Chaucer's descriptive style is remarkable for its lowness of tone, — for that combination of energy with simplicity which is among the rarest gifts in literature. Perhaps all is said in saying that he has style at all, for that consists mainly in the absence of undue emphasis and exaggeration, in the clear uniform pitch which penetrates our interest and retains it, where mere loudness would only disturb and irritate.

Not that Chaucer cannot be intense, too, on occasion; but it is with a quiet intensity of his own, that comes in as it were by accident.

"Upon a thickë palfrey, paper-white,
With saddle red embroidered with delight,
Sits Dido:
And she is fair as is the brightë morrow
That healeth sickë folk of nightës sorrow.
Upon a courser startling as the fire,
Æneas sits."

Pandarus, looking at Troilus, —

"Took up a light and found his countenance
As for to look upon an old romance."

With Chaucer it is always the thing itself and not the description of it that is the main object. His picturesque bits are incidental to the story, glimpsed in passing; they never stop the way. His key is so low that his high lights are never obtrusive. His imitators, like Leigh Hunt, and Keats in his "Endymion," missing the nice gradation with which the master toned everything down, become streaky. Hogarth, who reminds one of him in the variety and natural action of his figures, is like him also in the subdued brilliancy of his coloring. When Chaucer condenses, it is because his conception is vivid. He does not need to personify Revenge, for personification is but the subterfuge of unimaginative and professional poets; but he embodies the very passion itself in a verse that makes us glance over our shoulder as if we heard a stealthy tread behind us: —

"The smiler with the knife hid under the cloak." [1]

And yet how unlike is the operation of the imaginative faculty in him and Shakespeare! When the latter describes, his epithets imply always an impression on the moral sense (so to speak) of the person who hears or sees. The sun "flatters the mountain-tops with sovereign eye"; the bending "weeds lacquey the dull stream";

[1] Compare this with the Mumbo-Jumbo Revenge in Collins's Ode.

the shadow of the falcon "coucheth the fowl below"; the smoke is "helpless"; when Tarquin enters the chamber of Lucrece "the threshold grates the door to have him heard." His outward sense is merely a window through which the metaphysical eye looks forth, and his mind passes over at once from the simple sensation to the complex *meaning* of it, — feels *with* the object instead of merely feeling it. His imagination is forever dramatizing. Chaucer gives only the direct impression made on the eye or ear. He was the first great poet who really loved outward nature as the source of conscious pleasurable emotion. The Troubadour hailed the return of spring; but with him it was a piece of empty ritualism. Chaucer took a true delight in the new green of the leaves and the return of singing birds, — a delight as simple as that of Robin Hood: —

> "In summer when the shaws be sheen,
> And leaves be large and long,
> It is full merry in fair forest
> To hear the small birds' song."

He has never so much as heard of the "burthen and the mystery of all this unintelligible world." His flowers and trees and birds have never bothered themselves with Spinoza. He himself sings more like a bird than any other poet, because it never occurred to him, as to Goethe, that he ought to do so. He pours himself out in sin-

cere joy and thankfulness. When we compare Spenser's imitations of him with the original passages, we feel that the delight of the later poet was more in the expression than in the thing itself. Nature with him is only good to be transfigured by art. We walk among Chaucer's sights and sounds; we listen to Spenser's musical reproduction of them. In the same way, the pleasure which Chaucer takes in telling his stories has in itself the effect of consummate skill, and makes us follow all the windings of his fancy with sympathetic interest. His best tales run on like one of our inland rivers, sometimes hastening a little and turning upon themselves in eddies that dimple without retarding the current; sometimes loitering smoothly, while here and there a quiet thought, a tender feeling, a pleasant image, a golden-hearted verse, opens quietly as a water-lily, to float on the surface without breaking it into ripple. The vulgar intellectual palate hankers after the titillation of foaming phrase, and thinks nothing good for much that does not go off with a pop like a champagne cork. The mellow suavity of more precious vintages seems insipid: but the taste, in proportion as it refines, learns to appreciate the indefinable flavor, too subtile for analysis. A manner has prevailed of late in which every other word seems to be underscored as in a school-girl's letter. The poet seems intent on

showing his sinew, as if the power of the slim Apollo lay in the girth of his biceps. Force for the mere sake of force ends like Milo, caught and held mockingly fast by the recoil of the log he undertook to rive. In the race of fame, there are a score capable of brilliant *spurts* for one who comes in winner after a steady pull with wind and muscle to spare. Chaucer never shows any signs of effort, and it is a main proof of his excellence that he can be so inadequately sampled by detached passages, — by single lines taken away from the connection in which they contribute to the general effect. He has that continuity of thought, that evenly prolonged power, and that delightful equanimity, which characterize the higher orders of mind. There is something in him of the disinterestedness that made the Greeks masters in art. His phrase is never importunate. His simplicity is that of elegance, not of poverty. The quiet unconcern with which he says his best things is peculiar to him among English poets, though Goldsmith, Addison, and Thackeray have approached it in prose. He prattles inadvertently away, and all the while, like the princess in the story, lets fall a pearl at every other word. It is such a piece of good luck to be natural! It is the good gift which the fairy godmother brings to her prime favorites in the cradle. If not genius, it alone is what makes genius amiable in the arts. If a

man have it not, he will never find it, for when it is sought it is gone.

When Chaucer describes anything, it is commonly by one of those simple and obvious epithets or qualities that are so easy to miss. Is it a woman? He tells us she is *fresh;* that she has *glad* eyes; that "every day her beauty newed"; that

> "Methought all fellowship as naked
> Withouten her that I saw once,
> As a coróne without the stones."

Sometimes he describes amply by the merest hint, as where the Friar, before setting himself softly down, drives away the cat. We know without need of more words that he has chosen the snuggest corner. In some of his early poems he sometimes, it is true, falls into the catalogue style of his contemporaries; but after he had found his genius he never particularizes too much, — a process as deadly to all effect as an explanation to a pun. The first stanza of the "Clerk's Tale" gives us a landscape whose stately choice of objects shows a skill in composition worthy of Claude, the last artist who painted nature epically: —

> "There is at the west endë of Itaile,
> Down at the foot of Vesulus the cold,
> A lusty plain abundant of vitaile,
> Where many a tower and town thou may'st behold
> That founded were in time of fathers old,

And many another delitable sight;
And Sàlucës this noble country hight."

The Pre-Raphaelite style of landscape entangles the eye among the obtrusive weeds and grass-blades of the foreground which, in looking at a real bit of scenery, we overlook; but what a sweep of vision is here! and what happy generalization in the sixth verse as the poet turns away to the business of his story! The whole is full of open air.

But it is in his characters, especially, that his manner is large and free; for he is painting history, though with the fidelity of portrait. He brings out strongly the essential traits, characteristic of the genius rather than of the individual. The Merchant who keeps so steady a countenance that

"There wist no wight that he was e'er in debt," —

the Sergeant at Law, "who seemëd busier than he was," the Doctor of Medicine, whose "study was but little on the Bible," — in all these cases it is the type and not the personage that fixes his attention. William Blake says truly, though he expresses his meaning somewhat clumsily, "the characters of Chaucer's Pilgrims are the characters which compose all ages and nations. Some of the names and titles are altered by time, but the characters remain forever unaltered, and consequently they are the physiognomies and

lineaments of universal human life, beyond which Nature never steps. Names alter, things never alter. As Newton numbered the stars, and as Linnæus numbered the plants, so Chaucer numbered the classes of men." In his outside accessories, it is true, he sometimes seems as minute as if he were illuminating a missal. Nothing escapes his sure eye for the picturesque, — the cut of the beard, the soil of armor on the buff jerkin, the rust on the sword, the expression of the eye. But in this he has an artistic purpose. It is here that he individualizes, and, while every touch harmonizes with and seems to complete the moral features of the character, makes us feel that we are among living men, and not the abstracted images of men. Crabbe adds particular to particular, scattering rather than deepening the impression of reality, and making us feel as if every man were a species by himself; but Chaucer, never forgetting the essential sameness of human nature, makes it possible, and even probable, that his motley characters should meet on a common footing, while he gives to each the *expression* that belongs to him, the result of special circumstance or training. Indeed, the absence of any suggestion of *caste* cannot fail to strike any reader familiar with the literature on which he is supposed to have formed himself. No characters are at once so broadly human and so definitely outlined as his. Belong-

ing, some of them, to extinct types, they continue contemporary and familiar forever. So wide is the difference between knowing a great many men and that knowledge of human nature which comes of sympathetic insight and not of observation alone.

It is this power of sympathy which makes Chaucer's satire so kindly, — more so, one is tempted to say, than the panegyric of Pope. Intellectual satire gets its force from personal or moral antipathy, and measures offences by some rigid conventional standard. Its mouth waters over a galling word, and it loves to say *Thou*, pointing out its victim to public scorn. *Indignatio facit versus*, it boasts, though they might as often be fathered on envy or hatred. But imaginative satire, warmed through and through with the genial leaven of humor, smiles half sadly and murmurs *We*. Chaucer either makes one knave betray another, through a natural jealousy of competition, or else expose himself with a *naïveté* of good-humored cynicism which amuses rather than disgusts. In the former case the butt has a kind of claim on our sympathy; in the latter, it seems nothing strange, as I have already said, if the sunny atmosphere which floods that road to Canterbury should tempt anybody to throw off one disguise after another without suspicion. With perfect tact, too, the Host is made the *choragus* in this

diverse company, and the coarse jollity of his temperament explains, if it do not excuse, much that would otherwise seem out of keeping. Surely nobody need have any scruples with *him*.

Chaucer seems to me to have been one of the most purely original of poets, as much so in respect of the world that is about us as Dante in respect of that which is within us. There had been nothing like him before, there has been nothing since. He is original, not in the sense that he thinks and says what nobody ever thought and said before, and what nobody can ever think and say again, but because he is always natural, because, if not always absolutely new, he is always delightfully fresh, because he sets before us the world as it honestly appeared to Geoffrey Chaucer, and not a world as it seemed proper to certain people that it ought to appear. He found that the poetry which had preceded him had been first the expression of individual feeling, then of class feeling as the vehicle of legend and history, and at last had well-nigh lost itself in chasing the mirage of allegory. Literature seemed to have passed through the natural stages which at regular intervals bring it to decline. Even the lyrics of the *jongleurs* were all run in one mould, and the Pastourelles of Northern France had become as artificial as the Pastorals of Pope. The Romances of chivalry had been made over into prose, and the "Melusine"

of his contemporary Jehan d'Arras is the forlorn hope of the modern novel. Arrived thus far in their decrepitude, the monks endeavored to give them a religious and moral turn by allegorizing them. Their process reminds one of something Ulloa tells us of the fashion in which the Spaniards converted the Mexicans: "Here we found an old man in a cavern so extremely aged as it was wonderful, which could neither see nor go because he was so lame and crooked. The Father, Friar Raimund, said it were good (seeing he was so aged) to make him a Christian; whereupon we baptized him." The monks found the Romances in the same stage of senility, and gave them a saving sprinkle with the holy water of allegory. Perhaps they were only trying to turn the enemy's own weapons against himself, for it was the free-thinking "Romance of the Rose" that more than anything else had made allegory fashionable. Plutarch tells us that an allegory is to say one thing where another is meant, and this might have been needful for the personal security of Jean de Meung, as afterwards for that of his successor, Rabelais. But, except as a means of evading the fagot, the method has few recommendations. It reverses the true office of poetry by making the real unreal. It is imagination endeavoring to recommend itself to the understanding by means of cuts. If an author be in such deadly earnest,

or if his imagination be of such creative vigor as to project real figures when it meant to cast only a shadow upon vapor; if the true spirit come, at once obsequious and terrible, when the conjurer has drawn his circle and gone through with his incantations merely to produce a proper frame of mind in his audience, as was the case with Dante, there is no longer any question of allegory as the word and thing are commonly understood. But with all secondary poets, as with Spenser for example, the allegory does not become of one substance with the poetry, but is a kind of carven frame for it, whose figures lose their meaning, as they cease to be contemporary. It was not a style that could have much attraction for a nature so sensitive to the actual, so observant of it, so interested by it, as that of Chaucer. He seems to have tried his hand at all the forms in vogue, and to have arrived in his old age at the truth, essential to all really great poetry, that his own instincts were his safest guides, that there is nothing deeper in life than life itself, and that to conjure an allegorical significance into it was to lose sight of its real meaning. He of all men could not say one thing and mean another, unless by way of humorous contrast.

In thus turning frankly and gayly to the actual world, and drinking inspiration from sources open to all; in turning away from a colorless

abstraction to the solid earth and to emotions common to every pulse; in discovering that to make the best of Nature, and not to grope vaguely after something better than Nature, was the true office of Art; in insisting on a definite purpose, on veracity, cheerfulness, and simplicity, Chaucer shows himself the true father and founder of what is characteristically *English* literature. He has a hatred of cant as hearty as Dr. Johnson's, though he has a slier way of showing it; he has the placid common sense of Franklin, the sweet, grave humor of Addison, the exquisite taste of Gray; but the whole texture of his mind, though its substance seem plain and grave, shows itself at every turn iridescent with poetic feeling like shot silk. Above all, he has an eye for character that seems to have caught at once not only its mental and physical features, but even its expression in variety of costume, — an eye, indeed, second only, if it should be called second in some respects, to that of Shakespeare.

I know of nothing that may be compared with the Prologue to the "Canterbury Tales," and with that to the story of the "Chanon's Yeoman" before Chaucer. Characters and portraits from real life had never been drawn with such discrimination, or with such variety, never with such bold precision of outline, and with such a lively sense of the picturesque.

His Parson is still unmatched, though Dryden and Goldsmith have both tried their hands in emulation of him. And the humor also in its suavity, its perpetual presence and its shy unobtrusiveness, is something wholly new in literature. For anything that deserves to be called like it in English we must wait for Henry Fielding.

Chaucer is the first great poet who has treated To-day as if it were as good as Yesterday, the first who held up a mirror to contemporary life in its infinite variety of high and low, of humor and pathos. But he reflected life in its large sense as the life of *men*, from the knight to the ploughman, — the life of every day as it is made up of that curious compound of human nature with manners. The very form of the "Canterbury Tales" was imaginative. The garden of Boccaccio, the supper-party of Grazzini, and the voyage of Giraldi make a good enough thread for their stories, but exclude all save equals and friends, exclude consequently human nature in its wider meaning. But by choosing a pilgrimage, Chaucer puts us on a plane where all men are equal, with souls to be saved, and with another world in view that abolishes all distinctions. By this choice, and by making the Host of the Tabard always the central figure, he has happily united the two most familiar emblems of life, — the short journey and

the inn. We find more and more as we study him that he rises quietly from the conventional to the universal, and may fairly take his place with Homer in virtue of the breadth of his humanity.

In spite of some external stains, which those who have studied the influence of manners will easily account for without imputing them to any moral depravity, we feel that we can join the pure-minded Spenser in calling him "most sacred, happy spirit." If character may be divined from works, he was a good man, genial, sincere, hearty, temperate of mind, more wise, perhaps, for this world than the next, but thoroughly humane, and friendly with God and men. I know not how to sum up what we feel about him better than by saying (what would have pleased most one who was indifferent to fame) that we love him more even than we admire. We are sure that here was a true brother-man so kindly that, in his House of Fame, after naming the great poets, he throws in a pleasant word for the oaten-pipes

> "Of the little herd-grooms
> That keepen beasts among the brooms."

No better inscription can be written on the first page of his works than that which he places over the gate in his Assembly of Fowls, and which contrasts so sweetly with the stern lines of Dante from which they were imitated: —

"Through me men go into the blissful place
Of the heart's heal and deadly woundës' cure;
Through me men go unto the well of Grace,
Where green and lusty May doth ever endure;
This is the way to all good aventure;
Be glad, thou Reader, and thy sorrow offcast,
All open am I, pass in, and speed thee fast!"

MILTON[1]

1872

MILTON was a harmonist rather than a melodist. There are, no doubt, some exquisite melodies (like the "Sabrina Fair") among his earlier poems, as could hardly fail to be the case in an age which produced or trained the authors of our best English glees, as ravishing in their instinctive felicity as the songs of our dramatists, but he also showed from the first that larger style which was to be his peculiar distinction. The strain heard in the "Nativity Ode," in the "Solemn Music," and in "Lycidas," is of a higher mood, as regards metrical construction, than anything that

[1] *The Life of John Milton:* narrated in Connection with the Political, Ecclesiastical, and Literary History of his Time. By David Masson, M.A., LL.D., Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature in the University of Edinburgh. Vols. i., ii, 1638–1643. London and New York: Macmillan & Co. 1871., 8vo, pp. xii, 608.

The Poetical Works of John Milton, edited, with Introduction, Notes, and an Essay on Milton's English, by David Masson, M.A., LL.D., Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature in the University of Edinburgh. 3 vols. 8vo. Macmillan & Co. 1874.

had thrilled the English ear before, giving no uncertain augury of him who was to show what sonorous metal lay silent till he touched the keys in the epical organ-pipes of our various language, that have never since felt the strain of such prevailing breath. It was in the larger movements of metre that Milton was great and original. I have spoken elsewhere of Spenser's fondness for dilation as respects thoughts and images. In Milton it extends to the language also, and often to the single words of which a period is composed. He loved phrases of towering port, in which every member dilated stands like Teneriffe or Atlas. In those poems and passages that stamp him great, the verses do not dance interweaving to soft Lydian airs, but march rather with resounding tread and clang of martial music. It is true that he is cunning in alliterations, so scattering them that they tell in his orchestra without being obvious, but it is in the more scientific region of open-voweled assonances which seem to proffer rhyme and yet withhold it (rhyme-wraiths one might call them), that he is an artist and a master. He even sometimes introduces rhyme with misleading intervals between and unobviously in his blank verse: —

> "There rest, if any rest can harbour *there;*
> And, reassembling our afflicted powers,
> Consult how we may henceforth most offend
> Our enemy, our own loss how re*pair*,
> How overcome this dire calamity,

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What reinforcement we may gain from hope,
If not, what resolution from des*pair*." [1]

There is one almost perfect quatrain, —

"Before thy fellows, ambitious to win
From me some plume, that thy success may show
Destruction to the rest. This pause between
(Unanswered lest thou boast) to let thee know";—

and another hardly less so, of a rhyme and an assonance, —

"If once they hear that voice, their liveliest pledge
Of hope in fears and dangers, heard so oft
In worst extremes and on the perilous edge
Of battle when it raged, in all assaults."

There can be little doubt that the rhymes in the first passage cited were intentional, and perhaps they were so in the others; but Milton's ear has tolerated not a few perfectly rhyming couplets, and others in which the assonance almost becomes rhyme, certainly a fault in blank verse: —

"From the Asian Kings (and Parthian among these),
From India and the Golden Chersonese";

"That soon refreshed him wearied, and repaired
What hunger, if aught hunger, had impaired";

"And will alike be punished, whether thou
Reign or reign not, though to that gentle brow";

[1] I think Coleridge's nice ear would have blamed the nearness of *enemy* and *calamity* in this passage. Mr. Masson leaves out the comma after *If not*, the pause of which is needful, I think, to the sense, and certainly to keep *not* a little farther apart from *what*, ("teach each" !)

"Of pleasure, but all pleasure to destroy,
Save what is in destroying, other joy";

"Shall all be Paradise, far happier place
Than this of Eden, and far happier days";

"This my long sufferance and my day of grace
They who neglect and scorn shall never taste";

"So far remote with diminution seen,
First in his East the glorious lamp was seen." [1]

These examples (and others might be adduced) serve to show that Milton's ear was too busy about the larger interests of his measures to be always careful of the lesser. He was a strategist rather than a drill-sergeant in verse, capable, beyond any other English poet, of putting great masses through the most complicated evolutions without clash or confusion, but he was not curious that every foot should be at the same angle. In reading "Paradise Lost" one has a feeling of vastness. You float under an illimitable sky, brimmed with sunshine or hung with constellations; the abysses of space are about you; you hear the cadenced surges of an unseen ocean; thunders mutter round the horizon; and if the scene change, it is with an elemental movement like the shifting of mighty winds. His imagination seldom condenses, like Shakespeare's, in the kindling flash of a single epithet, but loves better to diffuse itself. Witness his descriptions,

[1] "First in his East," is not soothing to the ear.

wherein he seems to circle like an eagle bathing in the blue streams of air, controlling with his eye broad sweeps of champaign or of sea, and rarely fulmining in the sudden swoop of intenser expression. He was fonder of the vague, perhaps I should rather say the indefinite, where more is meant than meets the ear, than any other of our poets. He loved epithets (like *old* and *far*) that suggest great reaches, whether of space or time. This bias shows itself already in his earlier poems, as where he hears

> "The *far off* curfew sound
> Over some *widewatered* shore,"

or where he fancies the shores and sounding seas washing Lycidas far away; but it reaches its climax in the "Paradise Lost." He produces his effects by dilating our imaginations with an impalpable hint rather than by concentrating them upon too precise particulars. Thus in a famous comparison of his, the fleet has no definite port, but plies stemming nightly toward the pole in a wide ocean of conjecture. He generalizes always instead of specifying, — the true secret of the ideal treatment in which he is without peer, and, though everywhere grandiose, he is never turgid. Tasso begins finely with

> "Chiama gli abitator dell' ombre eterne
> Il rauco suon della tartarea tromba;
> Treman le spaziose atre caverne,
> E l' aer cieco a quel rumor rimbomba,"

but soon spoils all by condescending to definite comparisons with thunder and intestinal convulsions of the earth; in other words, he is unwary enough to give us a standard of measurement, and the moment you furnish Imagination with a yardstick she abdicates in favor of her statistical poor-relation Commonplace. Milton, with this passage in his memory, is too wise to hamper himself with any statement for which he can be brought to book, but wraps himself in a mist of looming indefiniteness; —

> "He called so loud that all the hollow deep
> Of hell resounded;"

thus amplifying more nobly by abstention from his usual method of prolonged evolution. No caverns, however spacious, will serve his turn, because they have limits. He could practise this self-denial when his artistic sense found it needful, whether for variety of verse or for the greater intensity of effect to be gained by abruptness. His more elaborate passages have the multitudinous roll of thunder, dying away to gather a sullen force again from its own reverberations, but he knew that the attention is recalled and arrested by those claps that stop short without echo and leave us listening. There are no such vistas and avenues of verse as his. In reading the "Paradise Lost" one has a feeling of spaciousness such as no other poet gives. Milton's respect for himself and for his own mind and

its movements rises well-nigh to veneration. He prepares the way for his thought and spreads on the ground before the sacred feet of his verse tapestries inwoven with figures of mythology and romance. There is no such unfailing dignity as his. Observe at what a reverent distance he begins when he is about to speak of himself, as at the beginning of the Third Book and the Seventh. His sustained strength is especially felt in his beginnings. He seems always to start full-sail; the wind and tide always serve; there is never any fluttering of the canvas. In this he offers a striking contrast with Wordsworth, who has to go through with a great deal of *yo-heave-ohing* before he gets under way. And though, in the didactic parts of "Paradise Lost," the wind dies away sometimes, there is a long swell that will not let us forget it, and ever and anon some eminent verse lifts its long ridge above its tamer peers heaped with stormy memories. And the poem never becomes incoherent; we feel all through it, as in the symphonies of Beethoven, a great controlling reason in whose safe-conduct we trust implicitly.

Mr. Masson's discussions of Milton's English are, it seems to me, for the most part unsatisfactory. He occupies some ten pages, for example, with a history of the genitival form *its*, which adds nothing to our previous knowledge on the subject and which has no relation to

Milton except for its bearing on the authorship of some verses attributed to him against the most overwhelming internal evidence to the contrary. Mr. Masson is altogether too resolute to find traces of what he calls oddly enough "recollectiveness of Latin constructions" in Milton, and scents them sometimes in what would seem to the uninstructed reader very idiomatic English. More than once, at least, he has fancied them by misunderstanding the passage in which they seem to occur. Thus, in "Paradise Lost," xi. 520, 521, —

> "Therefore so abject is their punishment,
> Disfiguring not God's likeness but their own," —

has no analogy with *eorum deformantium*, for the context shows that it is the *punishment* which disfigures. Indeed, Mr. Masson so often finds constructions difficult, ellipses strange, and words needing annotation that are common to all poetry, nay, sometimes to all English, that his notes seem not seldom to have been written by a foreigner. On this passage in "Comus," —

> "I do not think my sister so to seek
> Or so unprincipled in virtue's book
> And the sweet peace that virtue bosoms ever
> As that the single want of light and noise
> (Not being in danger, as I trust she is not)
> Could stir the constant mood of her calm thoughts,"

Mr. Masson tells us, that "in very strict con-

struction, *not being* would cling to *want* as its substantive; but the phrase passes for the Latin ablative absolute." So on the words *forestalling night*, "i. e. anticipating. *Forestall* is literally to anticipate the market by purchasing goods before they are brought to the stall." In the verse

"Thou hast immanacled while Heaven sees good,"

he explains that "*while* here has the sense of *so long as*." But Mr. Masson's notes on the language are his weakest. He is careful to tell us, for example, "that there are instances of the use of *shine* as a substantive in Spenser, Ben Jonson, and other poets." It is but another way of spelling *sheen*, and if Mr. Masson never heard a shoeblack in the street say, "Shall I give you a shine, sir?" his experience has been singular. His notes in general are very good (though too long). Those on the astronomy of Milton are particularly valuable. I think he is sometimes a little too scornful of parallel passages,[1] for if there is one thing more striking than another in this poet, it is that his great and original imagination was almost wholly nourished by books, perhaps I should rather say set in motion by

[1] A passage from Dante (*Inferno*, xi. 96–105), with its reference to Aristotle, would have given him the meaning of "Nature taught art," which seems to puzzle him. A study of Dante and of his earlier commentators would also have been of great service in the astronomical notes.

them. It is wonderful how, from the most withered and juiceless hint gathered in his reading, his grand images rise like an exhalation; how from the most battered old lamp caught in that huge drag-net with which he swept the waters of learning, he could conjure a tall genius to build his palaces. Whatever he touches swells and towers. That wonderful passage in "Comus" of the airy tongues, perhaps the most imaginative in suggestion he ever wrote, was conjured out of a dry sentence in Purchas's abstract of Marco Polo. Such examples help us to understand the poet. When I find that Sir Thomas Browne had said before Milton, that Adam "was *the wisest of all men since*," I am glad to find this link between the most profound and the most stately imagination of that age. Such parallels sometimes give a hint also of the historical development of our poetry, of its apostolical succession, so to speak. Every one has noticed Milton's fondness of sonorous proper names, which have not only an acquired imaginative value by association, and so serve to awaken our poetic sensibilities, but have likewise a merely musical significance. This he probably caught from Marlowe, traces of whom are frequent in him. There is certainly something of what afterwards came to be called Miltonic in more than one passage of "Tamburlaine," a play in which gigantic force seems

struggling from the block, as in Michael Angelo's Dawn.

Mr. Masson's remarks on the versification of Milton are, in the main, judicious, but when he ventures on particulars, one cannot always agree with him. He seems to understand that our prosody is accentual merely, and yet, when he comes to what he calls *variations*, he talks of the "substitution of the Trochee, the Pyrrhic, or the Spondee, for the regular Iambus, or of the Anapæst, the Dactyl, the Tribrach, etc., for the same." This is always misleading. The shift of the accent in what Mr. Masson calls "dissyllabic variations" is common to all pentameter verse, and, in the other case, most of the words cited as trisyllables either were not so in Milton's day,[1] or were so or not at choice of the poet, according to their place in the verse. There is not an elision of Milton's without precedent in the dramatists from whom he learned to write blank verse. Milton was a greater metrist than any of them, except Marlowe and Shakespeare, and he employed the elision (or the slur) oftener than they to give a faint undulation or retardation to his verse, only because his epic form demanded

[1] Almost every combination of two vowels might in those days be a diphthong or not, at will. Milton's practice of elision was confirmed and sometimes (perhaps) modified by his study of the Italians, with whose usage in this respect he closely conforms.

it more for variety's sake. How Milton would have *read* them, is another question. He certainly often marked them by an apostrophe in his manuscripts. He doubtless composed according to quantity, so far as that is possible in English, and as Cowper somewhat extravagantly says, "gives almost as many proofs of it in his 'Paradise Lost' as there are lines in the poem."[1] But when Mr. Masson tells us that

"Self-fed and self-consumed: if this fail,"

and

"Dwells in all Heaven charity so rare,"

are "only nine syllables," and that in

"Created hugest that swim the ocean-stream,"

"either the third foot must be read as an *anapæst* or the word *hugest* must be pronounced as one syllable, *hug'st*," I think Milton would have invoked the soul of Sir John Cheek. Of course Milton read it

"Created hugest that swim th' ocean-stream," —

just as he wrote (if we may trust Mr. Masson's facsimile)

"Thus sang the uncouth swain to th' oaks and rills," —

a verse in which both hiatus and elision occur precisely as in the Italian poets.[2] "Gest that

[1] Letter to Rev. W. Bagot, 4th January, 1791.

[2] So Dante: —

"Ma sapienza e amore e virtute."

So Donne: —

"Simony and sodomy in churchmen's lives."

swim" would be rather a knotty *anapæst*, an insupportable foot indeed! And why is even *hug'st* worse than Shakespeare's

"*Young'st* follower of thy drum"?

In the same way he says of

"For we have also our evening and our morn,"

that "the metre of this line is irregular," and of the rapidly fine

"Came flying and in mid air aloud thus cried,'

that it is "a line of unusual metre." Why more unusual than

"As being the contrary to his high will"?

What would Mr. Masson say to these three verses from Dekkar?—

"And *knowing* so much, I muse thou art so poor";

"I fan away the dust *flying* in mine eyes";

"*Flowing* o'er with court news only of you and them."

All such participles (where no consonant divided the vowels) were normally of one syllable, permissibly of two.[1] If Mr. Masson had studied the poets who preceded Milton as he

[1] Mr. Masson is evidently not very familiar at first hand with the versification to which Milton's youthful ear had been trained, but seems to have learned something from Abbott's *Shakespearian Grammar* in the interval between writing his notes and his Introduction. Walker's *Shakespeare's Versification* would have been a great help to him in default of original knowledge.

has studied *him*, he would never have said that the verse —

"Not this rock only; his omnipresence fills" —

was "peculiar as having a distinct syllable of over-measure." He retains Milton's spelling of *hunderd* without perceiving the metrical reason for it, that *d*, *t*, *p*, *b*, etc., followed by *l* or *r*, might be either of two or of three syllables. In Marlowe we find it both ways in two consecutive verses: —

"A hundred [hunderëd] and fifty thousand horse,
Two hundred thousand foot, brave men at arms." [1]

Mr. Masson is especially puzzled by verses ending in one or more unaccented syllables, and even argues in his Introduction that some of them might be reckoned Alexandrines. He cites some lines of Spenser as confirming his theory, forgetting that rhyme wholly changes the conditions of the case by throwing the accent (appreciably even now, but more emphatically in Spenser's day) on the last syllable.

"A spirit and judgment equal or superior,"

he calls "a remarkably anomalous line, consisting of twelve or even thirteen syllables." Surely Milton's ear would never have tolerated a dis-

[1] Milton has a verse in *Comus* where the *e* is elided from the word *sister* by its preceding a vowel: —

"Heaven keep my sister! again, again, and near!"

This would have been impossible before a consonant.

syllabic "spirit" in such a position. The word was then more commonly of one syllable, though it might be two, and was accordingly spelt *spreet* (still surviving in *sprite*), *sprit*, and even *spirt*, as Milton himself spells it in one of Mr. Masson's facsimiles.[1] Shakespeare, in the verse

"Hath put a spirit of youth in everything,"

uses the word admirably well in a position where it *cannot* have a metrical value of more than one syllable, while it gives a dancing movement to the verse in keeping with the sense. Our old metrists were careful of elasticity, a quality which modern verse has lost in proportion as our language has stiffened into uniformity under the benumbing fingers of pedants.

This discussion of the value of syllables is not so trifling as it seems. A great deal of nonsense has been written about imperfect measures in Shakespeare, and of the admirable dramatic effect produced by filling up the gaps of missing syllables with pauses or prolongations of the voice in reading. In rapid, abrupt, and passionate dialogue this is possible, but in passages of continuously level speech it is barbarously absurd. I do not believe that any of our old dramatists has knowingly left us a single imperfect verse. Seeing in what a haphazard way

[1] So *spirito* and *spirto* in Italian, *esperis* and *espirs* in Old French.

and in how mutilated a form their plays have mostly reached us, we should attribute such *faults* (as a geologist would call them) to anything rather than to the deliberate design of the poets. Marlowe and Shakespeare, the two best metrists among them, have given us a standard by which to measure what licenses they took in versification, — the one in his translations, the other in his poems. The unmanageable verses in Milton are very few, and all of them occur in works printed after his blindness had lessened the chances of supervision and increased those of error. There are only two, indeed, which seem to me wholly indigestible as they stand. These are,

> "Burnt after them to the bottomless pit,"

and

> "With them from bliss to the bottomless deep."

This certainly looks like a case where a word had dropped out or had been stricken out by some proof-reader who limited the number of syllables in a pentameter verse by that of his finger-ends. Mr. Masson notices only the first of these lines, and says that to make it regular by accenting the word *bottomless* on the second syllable would be "too horrible." Certainly not, if Milton so accented it, any more than *blasphémous* and twenty more which sound oddly to us now. However that may be, Milton could not

have intended to close not only a period, but a paragraph also, with an unmusical verse, and in the only other passage where the word occurs it is accented as now on the first syllable: —

> "With hideous ruin and combustion down
> To bottomless perdition, there to dwell."

As *bottom* is a word which, like *bosom* and *besom*, may be monosyllabic or dissyllabic according to circumstances, I am persuaded that the last passage quoted (and all three refer to the same event) gives us the word wanting in the two others, and that Milton wrote, or meant to write,

> "Burnt after them down to the bottomless pit,"

which leaves in the verse precisely the kind of ripple that Milton liked best.[1]

Much of what Mr. Masson says in his Introduction of the way in which the verses of Milton should be read is judicious enough, though some of the examples he gives, of the "comicality" which would ensue from compressing every verse into an exact measure of ten syllables, are based on a surprising ignorance of the

[1] Milton, however, would not have balked at *th' bottomless* any more than Drayton at *th' rejected* or Donne at *th' sea*. Mr. Masson does not seem to understand this elision, for he corrects *i' th' midst* to *i' the midst*, and takes pains to mention it in a note. He might better have restored the *n* in *i'*, where it is no contraction, but merely indicates the pronunciation, as *o'* for *of* and *on*.

laws which guided our poets just before and during Milton's time in the structure of their verses. Thus he seems to think that a strict scansion would require us in the verses

"So he with difficulty and labor hard,"

and

"Carnation, purple, azure, or specked with gold"

to pronounce *diffikty* and *purp'*. Though Mr. Masson talks of "slurs and elisions," his ear would seem somewhat insensible to their exact nature or office. His *diffikty* supposes a hiatus where none is intended, and his making *purple* of one syllable wrecks the whole verse, the real slur in the latter case being on *azure or*.[1] When he asks whether Milton required "these pronunciations in his verse," no positive answer can be given, but I very much doubt whether he would have thought that some of the lines Mr. Masson cites "remain perfectly good Blank Verse even with the most leisurely natural enunciation of the spare syllable," and I am sure he would have stared if told that "the number of accents" in a pentameter verse was "variable." It may be doubted whether elisions and compressions which would be thought in bad taste or even vulgar now were more abhorrent to the ears of Milton's generation than to a cultivated

[1] Exactly analogous to that in *treasurer* when it is shortened to two syllables.

Italian would be the hearing Dante read as prose. After all, what Mr. Masson says may be reduced to the infallible axiom that poetry should be read as poetry.

Mr. Masson seems to be right in his main principles, but the examples he quotes make one doubt whether he knows what a verse is. For example, he thinks it would be a "horror," if in the verse

> "That invincible Samson far renowned,"

we should lay the stress on the first syllable of *invincible*. It is hard to see why this should be worse than *cónventicle* or *rémonstrance* or *súccessor* or *incómpatible* (the three latter used by the correct Daniel), or why Mr. Masson should clap an accent on *surfàce* merely because it comes at the end of a verse, and deny it to *invincible*. If one read the verse just cited with those that go with it, he will find that the accent *must* come on the first syllable of *invincible*, or else the whole passage becomes chaos.[1] Should we refuse to say *obleeged* with Pope because the fashion has changed? From its apparently greater freedom in skilful hands, blank verse

[1] Milton himself has *invisible*, for we cannot suppose him guilty of a verse like

> "Shoots invisible virtue even to the deep,"

while, if read rightly, it has just one of those sweeping elisions that he loved.

gives more scope to sciolistic theorizing and dogmatism than the rhyming pentameter couplet, but it is safe to say that no verse is good in the one that would not be good in the other when handled by a master like Dryden. Milton, like other great poets, wrote some bad verses, and it is wiser to confess that they are so than to conjure up some unimaginable reason why the reader should accept them as the better for their badness. Such a bad verse is

"Rocks, caves, lakes, *fens*, bogs, *dens* and shapes of death,"

which might be cited to illustrate Pope's

"And ten low words oft creep in one dull line."

Milton cannot certainly be taxed with any partiality for low words. He rather loved them tall, as the Prussian King loved men to be six feet high in their stockings, and fit to go into the grenadiers. He loved them as much for their music as for their meaning, — perhaps more. His style, therefore, when it has to deal with commoner things, is apt to grow a little cumbrous and unwieldy. A Persian poet says that when the owl would boast, he boasts of catching mice at the edge of a hole. Shakespeare would have understood this. Milton would have made him talk like an eagle. His influence is not to be left out of account as partially contributing to that decline toward poetic diction which was already beginning ere he died.

If it would not be fair to say that he is the most artistic, he may be called in the highest sense the most scientific of our poets. If to Spenser younger poets have gone to be sung to, they have sat at the feet of Milton to be taught. Our language has no finer poem than "Samson Agonistes," if any so fine in the quality of austere dignity or in the skill with which the poet's personal experience is generalized into a classic tragedy.

Gentle as Milton's earlier portraits would seem to show him, he had in him by nature, or bred into him by fate, something of the haughty and defiant self-assertion of Dante and Michael Angelo. In no other English author is the man so large a part of his works. Milton's haughty conception of himself enters into all he says and does. Always the necessity of this one man became that of the whole human race for the moment. There were no walls so sacred but must go to the ground when *he* wanted elbow-room; and he wanted a great deal. Did Mary Powell, the cavalier's daughter, find the abode of a roundhead schoolmaster *incompatible* and leave it, forthwith the cry of the universe was for an easier dissolution of the marriage covenant. If *he* is blind, it is with excess of light, it is a divine partiality, an overshadowing with angels' wings. Phineus and Teiresias are admitted among the prophets because they, too, had lost

their sight, and the blindness of Homer is of more account than his "Iliad." After writing in rhyme till he was past fifty, he finds it unsuitable for his epic, and it at once becomes "the invention of a barbarous age to set off wretched matter and lame metre." If the structure of *his* mind be undramatic, why, then, the English drama is naught, learned Jonson, sweetest Shakespeare, and the rest notwithstanding, and he will compose a tragedy on a Greek model with the blinded Samson for its hero, and he will compose it partly in rhyme. Plainly he belongs to the intenser kind of men whose yesterdays are in no way responsible for their to-morrows. And this makes him perennially interesting even to those who hate his politics, despise his Socinianism, and find his greatest poem a bore. A new edition of his poems is always welcome, for, as he is really great, he presents a fresh side to each new student, and Mr. Masson, in his three handsome volumes, has given us, with much that is superfluous and even erroneous, much more that is a solid and permanent acquisition to our knowledge.

It results from the almost scornful withdrawal of Milton into the fortress of his absolute personality that no great poet is so uniformly self-conscious as he. We should say of Shakespeare that he had the power of transforming himself into everything; of Milton, that he had that of

transforming everything into himself. Dante is individual rather than self-conscious, and he, the cast-iron man, grows pliable as a field of grain at the breath of Beatrice, and flows away in waves of sunshine. But Milton never lets himself go for a moment. As other poets are possessed by their theme, so is he *self*-possessed, his great theme being John Milton, and his great duty that of interpreter between him and the world. I say it with all respect, for he was well worthy translation, and it is out of Hebrew that the version is made. Pope says he makes God the Father reason "like a school-divine." The criticism is witty, but inaccurate. He makes Deity a mouthpiece for his present theology, and had the poem been written a few years later, the Almighty would have become more heterodox. Since Dante, no one had stood on these visiting terms with heaven.

Now it is precisely this audacity of self-reliance, I suspect, which goes far toward making the sublime, and which, falling by a hair's-breadth short thereof, makes the ridiculous. Puritanism showed both the strength and weakness of its prophetic nurture; enough of the latter to be scoffed out of England by the very men it had conquered in the field, enough of the former to intrench itself in three or four immortal memories. It has left an abiding mark in politics and religion, but its great monuments

are the prose of Bunyan and the verse of Milton. It is a high inspiration to be the neighbor of great events; to have been a partaker in them, and to have seen noble purposes by their own self-confidence become the very means of ignoble ends, if it do not wholly repress, may kindle a passion of regret, deepening the song which dares not tell the reason of its sorrow. The grand loneliness of Milton in his latter years, while it makes him the most impressive figure in our literary history, is reflected also in his maturer poems by a sublime independence of human sympathy like that with which mountains fascinate and rebuff us. But it is idle to talk of the loneliness of one the habitual companions of whose mind were the Past and Future. I always seem to see him leaning in his blindness a hand on the shoulder of each, sure that the one will guard the song which the other had inspired.

DRYDEN[1]

1868

BENVENUTO CELLINI tells us that when, in his boyhood, he saw a salamander come out of the fire, his grandfather forthwith gave him a sound beating, that he might the better remember so unique a prodigy. Though perhaps in this case the rod had another application than the autobiographer chooses to disclose, and was intended to fix in the pupil's mind a lesson of veracity rather than of science, the testimony to its mnemonic virtue remains. Nay, so universally was it once believed that the senses, and through them the faculties of observation and retention, were quick-

[1] *The Dramatick Works of John Dryden, Esq.* In six volumes. London: Printed for Jacob Tonson, in the Strand. MDCCXXXV. 18mo.

The Critical and Miscellaneous Prose-Works of John Dryden, now first collected. With Notes and Illustrations. An Account of the Life and Writings of the Author, grounded on Original and Authentick Documents; and a Collection of his Letters, the greatest Part of which has never before been published. By Edmund Malone, Esq. London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, in the Strand. 4 vols. 8vo.

The Poetical Works of John Dryden. (Edited by Mitford.) London: W. Pickering. 1832. 5 vols. 18mo.

ened by an irritation of the cuticle, that in France it was customary to whip the children annually at the boundaries of the parish, lest the true place of them might ever be lost through neglect of so inexpensive a mordant for the memory. From this practice the older school of critics should seem to have taken a hint for keeping fixed the limits of good taste, and what was somewhat vaguely called *classical* English. To mark these limits in poetry, they set up as Hermæ the images they had made to them of Dryden, of Pope, and later of Goldsmith. Here they solemnly castigated every new aspirant in verse, who in turn performed the same function for the next generation, thus helping to keep always sacred and immovable the *ne plus ultra* alike of inspiration and of the vocabulary. Though no two natures were ever much more unlike than those of Dryden and Pope, and again of Pope and Goldsmith, and no two styles, except in such externals as could be easily caught and copied, yet it was the fashion, down even to the last generation, to advise young writers to form themselves, as it was called, on these excellent models. Wordsworth himself began in this school; and though there were glimpses, here and there, of a direct study of Nature, yet most of the epithets in his earlier pieces were of the traditional kind so fatal to poetry during great part of the last century; and he indulged in that alphabetic per-

sonification which enlivens all such words as Hunger, Solitude, Freedom, by the easy magic of an initial capital.

> "Where the green apple shrivels on the spray,
> And pines the unripened pear in summer's kindliest ray,
> Even here Content has fixed her smiling reign
> With Independence, child of high Disdain.
> Exulting 'mid the winter of the skies,
> Shy as the jealous chamois, Freedom flies,
> And often grasps her sword, and often eyes."

Here we have every characteristic of the artificial method (if we except the unconscious alexandrine in the second line), even to the triplet, which Swift hated so heartily as "a vicious way of rhyming wherewith Mr. Dryden abounded, imitated by all the bad versifiers of Charles the Second's reign." Wordsworth became, indeed, very early the leader of reform; but, like Wesley, he endeavored a reform within the Establishment. Purifying the substance, he retained the outward forms with a feeling rather than conviction that, in poetry, substance and form are but manifestations of the same inward life, the one fused into the other in the vivid heat of their common expression. Wordsworth could never wholly shake off the influence of the century into which he was born. He began by proposing a reform of the ritual, but it went no further than an attempt to get rid of the words of Latin original where the meaning was as well or better

given in derivatives of the Saxon. He would have stricken out the "assemble" and left the "meet together." Like Wesley, he might be compelled by necessity to a breach of the canon; but, like him, he was never a willing schismatic, and his singing-robes were the full and flowing canonicals of the church by law established. Inspiration makes short work with the usage of the best authors and with the ready-made elegances of diction; but where Wordsworth is not possessed by his demon, as Molière said of Corneille, he equals Thomson in verbiage, out-Miltons Milton in artifice of style, and Latinizes his diction beyond Dryden. The fact was, that he took up his early opinions on instinct, and insensibly modified them as he studied the masters of what may be called the Middle Period of English verse.[1] As a young man, he disparaged Virgil ("We talked a great deal of nonsense in those days," he said when taken to task for it later in life); at fifty-nine he translated three books of the Æneid, in emulation of Dryden, though falling far short of him in everything but closeness, as he seems, after a few years, to have been convinced. Keats was the first resolute and wilful heretic, the true founder of the modern school, which admits no cis-Elizabethan

[1] His *Character of a Happy Warrior* (1806), one of his noblest poems, has a dash of Dryden in it, — still more his *Epistle to Sir George Beaumont* (1811).

authority save Milton, whose own English was formed upon those earlier models. Keats denounced the authors of that style which came in toward the close of the seventeenth century, and reigned absolute through the whole of the eighteenth, as

> "A schism,
> Nurtured by foppery and barbarism,
> . . . . who went about
> Holding a poor decrepit standard out,
> Marked with most flimsy mottoes, and in large
> The name of one Boileau!"

But Keats had never then[1] studied the writers of whom he speaks so contemptuously, though he might have profited by so doing. Boileau would at least have taught him that *flimsy* would have been an apter epithet for the *standard* than for the mottoes upon it. Dryden was the author of that schism against which Keats so vehemently asserts the claim of the orthodox teaching it had displaced. He was far more just to Boileau, of whom Keats had probably never read a word. "If I would only cross the seas," he says, "I might find in France a living Horace and a Juvenal in the person of the admirable Boileau, whose numbers are excellent, whose expressions are noble, whose thoughts are just, whose language is pure, whose satire is pointed, and whose sense is just. What he borrows from

[1] He studied Dryden's versification before writing his *Lamia*.

the ancients he repays with usury of his own, in coin as good and almost as universally valuable." [1]

Dryden has now been in his grave nearly a hundred and seventy years; in the second class of English poets perhaps no one stands, on the whole, so high as he; during his lifetime, in spite of jealousy, detraction, unpopular politics, and a suspicious change of faith, his preëminence was conceded; he was the earliest complete type of the purely literary man, in the modern sense; there is a singular unanimity in allowing him a certain claim to *greatness* which would be denied to men as famous and more read, — to Pope or Swift, for example; he is supposed, in some way or other, to have reformed English poetry. It is now about half a century since the only uniform edition of his works was edited by Scott. No library is complete without him, no name is more familiar than his, and yet it may be suspected that few writers are more thoroughly buried in that great cemetery of the "British Poets." If contemporary reputation be often deceitful, posthumous fame may be generally trusted, for it is a verdict made up of the suffrages of the select men in succeeding generations. This verdict has been as good as unanimous in favor of Dryden. It

[1] *On the Origin and Progress of Satire.* See Johnson's counter-opinion in his life of Dryden.

is, perhaps, worth while to take a fresh observation of him, to consider him neither as warning nor example, but to endeavor to make out what it is that has given so lofty and firm a position to one of the most unequal, inconsistent, and faulty writers that ever lived. He is a curious example of what we often remark of the living, but rarely of the dead, — that they get credit for what they might be quite as much as for what they are, — and posterity has applied to him one of his own rules of criticism, judging him by the best rather than the average of his achievement, a thing posterity is seldom wont to do. On the losing side in politics, it is true of his polemical writings as of Burke's, — whom in many respects he resembles, and especially in that supreme quality of a reasoner, that his mind gathers not only heat, but clearness and expansion, by its own motion, — that they have won his battle for him in the judgment of after times.

To me, looking back at him, he gradually becomes a singularly interesting and even picturesque figure. He is, in more senses than one, in language, in turn of thought, in style of mind, in the direction of his activity, the first of the moderns. He is the first literary man who was also a man of the world, as we understand the term. He succeeded Ben Jonson as the acknowledged dictator of wit and criticism,

as Dr. Johnson, after nearly the same interval, succeeded him. All ages are, in some sense, ages of transition; but there are times when the transition is more marked, more rapid; and it is, perhaps, an ill fortune for a man of letters to arrive at maturity during such a period, still more to represent in himself the change that is going on, and to be an efficient cause in bringing it about. Unless, like Goethe, he be of a singularly uncontemporaneous nature, capable of being *tutta in sè romita*, and of running parallel with his time rather than being sucked into its current, he will be thwarted in that harmonious development of native force which has so much to do with its steady and successful application. Dryden suffered, no doubt, in this way. Though in creed he seems to have drifted backward in an eddy of the general current; yet of the intellectual movement of the time, so far certainly as literature shared in it, he could say, with Æneas, not only that he saw, but that himself was a great part of it. That movement was, on the whole, a downward one, from faith to scepticism, from enthusiasm to cynicism, from the imagination to the understanding. It was in a direction altogether away from those springs of imagination and faith at which they of the last age had slaked the thirst or renewed the vigor of their souls. Dryden himself recognized that indefinable and gregarious influence which

we call nowadays the Spirit of the Age, when he said that "every Age has a kind of universal Genius."[1] He had also a just notion of that in which he lived; for he remarks, incidentally, that "all knowing ages are naturally sceptic and not at all bigoted, which, if I am not much deceived, is the proper character of our own."[2] It may be conceived that he was even painfully half aware of having fallen upon a time incapable, not merely of a great poet, but perhaps of any poet at all; for nothing is so sensitive to the chill of a sceptical atmosphere as that enthusiasm which, if it be not genius, is at least the beautiful illusion that saves it from the baffling quibbles of self-consciousness. Thrice unhappy he who, born to see things as they might be, is schooled by circumstances to see them as people say they are, — to read God in a prose translation. Such was Dryden's lot, and such, for a good part of his days, it was by his own choice. He who was of a stature to snatch the torch of life that flashes from lifted hand to hand along the generations, over the heads of inferior men, chose rather to be a link-boy to the stews.

As a writer for the stage, he deliberately adopted and repeatedly reaffirmed the maxim that

"He who lives to please, must please to live."

[1] *Essay on Dramatick Poesy.* [2] *Life of Lucian.*

Without earnest convictions, no great or sound literature is conceivable. But if Dryden mostly wanted that inspiration which comes of belief in and devotion to something nobler and more abiding than the present moment and its petulant need, he had, at least, the next best thing to that, — a thorough faith in himself. He was, moreover, a man of singularly open soul, and of a temper self-confident enough to be candid even with himself. His mind was growing to the last, his judgment widening and deepening, his artistic sense refining itself more and more. He confessed his errors, and was not ashamed to retrace his steps in search of that better knowledge which the omniscience of superficial study had disparaged. Surely an intellect that is still pliable at seventy is a phenomenon as interesting as it is rare. But at whatever period of his life we look at Dryden, and whatever, for the moment, may have been his poetic creed, there was something in the nature of the man that would not be wholly subdued to what it worked in. There are continual glimpses of something in him greater than he, hints of possibilities finer than anything he has done. You feel that the whole of him was better than any random specimens, though of his best, seem to prove. *Incessu patet*, he has by times the large stride of the elder race, though it sinks too often into the slouch of a man who has seen better days. His grand air

may, in part, spring from a habit of easy superiority to his competitors; but must also, in part, be ascribed to an innate dignity of character. That this preëminence should have been so generally admitted, during his life, can only be explained by a bottom of good sense, kindliness, and sound judgment, whose solid worth could afford that many a flurry of vanity, petulance, and even error should flit across the surface and be forgotten. Whatever else Dryden may have been, the last and abiding impression of him is, that he was thoroughly manly; and while it may be disputed whether he were a great poet, it may be said of him, as Wordsworth said of Burke, that "he was by far the greatest man of his age, not only abounding in knowledge himself, but feeding, in various directions, his most able contemporaries."[1]

Dryden was born in 1631. He was accordingly six years old when Jonson died, was nearly a quarter of a century younger than Milton, and may have personally known Bishop Hall, the first English satirist, who was living till 1656. On the other side, he was older than Swift by thirty-six, than Addison by forty-one, and than Pope by fifty-seven years. Dennis says that "Dryden, for the last ten years of his

[1] "The great man must have that intellect which puts in motion the intellect of others." (Landor, *Imaginary Conversations*, Diogenes and Plato.)

life, was much acquainted with Addison, and drank with him more than he ever used to do, probably so far as to hasten his end," being commonly "an extreme sober man." Pope tells us that, in his twelfth year, he "saw Dryden," perhaps at Will's, perhaps in the street, as Scott did Burns. Dryden himself visited Milton now and then, and was intimate with Davenant, who could tell him of Fletcher and Jonson from personal recollection. Thus he stands between the age before and that which followed him, giving a hand to each. His father was a country clergyman, of Puritan leanings, a younger son of an ancient county family. The Puritanism is thought to have come in with the poet's great-grandfather, who made in his will the somewhat singular statement that he was "assured by the Holy Ghost that he was elect of God." It would appear from this that Dryden's self-confidence was an inheritance. The solid quality of his mind showed itself early. He himself tells us that he had read Polybius "in English, with the pleasure of a boy, before he was ten years of age, and yet even then *had some dark notions of the prudence with which he conducted his design.*" [1] The concluding words are very characteristic, even if Dryden, as men commonly do, interpreted his boyish turn of mind by later self-knowledge. We thus get a glimpse of him browsing — for,

[1] *Character of Polybius* (1692).

like Johnson, Burke, and the full as distinguished from the learned men, he was always a random reader[1] — in his father's library, and painfully culling here and there a spray of his own proper nutriment from among the stubs and thorns of Puritan divinity. After such schooling as could be had in the country, he was sent up to Westminster School, then under the headship of the celebrated Dr. Busby. Here he made his first essays in verse, translating, among other school exercises of the same kind, the third satire of Persius. In 1650 he was entered at Trinity College, Cambridge, and remained there for seven years. The only record of his college life is a discipline imposed, in 1652, for "disobedience to the Vice-Master, and contumacy in taking his punishment, inflicted by him." Whether this punishment was corporeal, as Johnson insinuates in the similar case of Milton, we are ignorant. He certainly retained no very fond recollection of his Alma Mater, for in his "Prologue to the University of Oxford" he says:—

> "Oxford to him a dearer name shall be
> Than his own mother university;
> Thebes did his green, unknowing youth engage,
> He chooses Athens in his riper age."

By the death of his father, in 1654, he came

[1] "For my own part, who must confess it to my shame that I never read anything but for pleasure." (*Life of Plutarch*, 1683.)

into possession of a small estate of sixty pounds a year, from which, however, a third must be deducted, for his mother's dower, till 1676. After leaving Cambridge, he became secretary to his near relative, Sir Gilbert Pickering, at that time Cromwell's chamberlain, and a member of his Upper House. In 1670 he succeeded Davenant as Poet Laureate,[1] and Howell as Historiographer, with a yearly salary of two hundred pounds. This place he lost at the Revolution, and had the mortification to see his old enemy and butt, Shadwell, promoted to it, as the best poet the Whig party could muster. If William was obliged to read the verses of his official minstrel, Dryden was more than avenged. From 1688 to his death, twelve years later, he earned his bread manfully by his pen, without any mean complaining, and with no allusion to his fallen fortunes that is not dignified and touching. These latter years, during which he was his own man again, were probably the happiest of his life. In 1664 or 1665 he married Lady Elizabeth Howard, daughter of the Earl of Berkshire. About a hundred pounds a year were thus added to his income. The marriage is said not to have been a happy one, and per-

[1] Gray says petulantly enough that "Dryden was as disgraceful to the office, from his character, as the poorest scribbler could have been from his verses." (Gray to Mason, 19th December, 1757.)

haps it was not, for his wife was apparently a weak-minded woman; but the inference from the internal evidence of Dryden's plays, as of Shakespeare's, is very untrustworthy, ridicule of marriage having always been a common stock in trade of the comic writers.

The earliest of his verses that have come down to us were written upon the death of Lord Hastings, and are as bad as they can be, — a kind of parody on the worst of Donne. They have every fault of his manner, without a hint of the subtle and often profound thought that more than redeems it. As the Doctor himself would have said, here is Donne outdone. The young nobleman died of the small-pox, and Dryden exclaims with truly comic pathos,—

> "Was there no milder way than the small-pox,
> The very filthiness of Pandora's box?"

He compares the pustules to "rosebuds stuck i' the lily skin about," and says that

> "Each little pimple had a tear in it
> To wail the fault its rising did commit."

But he has not done his worst yet, by a great deal. What follows is even finer: —

> "No comet need foretell his change drew on,
> Whose corpse might seem a constellation.
> O, had he died of old, how great a strife
> Had been who from his death should draw their life!
> Who should, by one rich draught, become whate'er
> Seneca, Cato, Numa, Cæsar, were,

Learned, virtuous, pious, great, and have by this
An universal metempsychosis!
Must all these aged sires in one funeral
Expire? all die in one so young, so small?"

It is said that one of Allston's early pictures was brought to him, after he had long forgotten it, and his opinion asked as to the wisdom of the young artist's persevering in the career he had chosen. Allston advised his quitting it forthwith as hopeless. Could the same experiment have been tried with these verses upon Dryden, can any one doubt that his counsel would have been the same? It should be remembered, however, that he was barely turned eighteen when they were written, and the tendency of his style is noticeable in so early an abandonment of the participial *ed* in *learned* and *aged*. In the next year he appears again in some commendatory verses prefixed to the sacred epigrams of his friend, John Hoddesdon. In these he speaks of the author as a

"Young eaglet, who, thy nest thus soon forsook,
So lofty and divine a course hast took
As all admire, before the down begin
To peep, as yet, upon thy smoother chin."

Here is almost every fault which Dryden's later nicety would have condemned. But perhaps there is no schooling so good for an author as his own youthful indiscretions. Certainly there is none so severe. After this effort Dry-

den seems to have lain fallow for ten years, and then he at length reappears in thirty-seven "heroic stanzas" on the death of Cromwell. The versification is smoother, but the conceits are there again, though in a milder form. The verse is modelled after "Gondibert." A single image from Nature (he was almost always happy in these) gives some hint of the maturer Dryden:—

> "And wars, like mists that rise against the sun,
> Made him but greater seem, not greater grow."

Two other verses —

> "And the isle, when her protecting genius went,
> Upon his obsequies loud sighs conferred"—

are interesting, because they show that he had been studying the early poems of Milton. He has contrived to bury under a rubbish of verbiage one of the most purely imaginative passages ever written by the great Puritan poet.

> "From haunted spring and dale,
> Edged with poplar pale,
> The parting genius is with sighing sent.'

This is the more curious because, twenty-four years afterwards, he says, in defending rhyme: "Whatever causes he [Milton] alleges for the abolishment of rhyme, his own particular reason is plainly this, that rhyme was not his talent; he had neither the ease of doing it nor the graces of it: which is manifest in his 'Juvenilia,'

. . . where his rhyme is always constrained and forced, and comes hardly from him, at an age when the soul is most pliant, and the passion of love makes almost every man a rhymer, though not a poet."[1] It was this, no doubt, that heartened Dr. Johnson to say of "Lycidas" that "the diction was harsh, the rhymes uncertain, and the numbers unpleasing." It is Dryden's excuse that his characteristic excellence is to argue persuasively and powerfully, whether in verse or prose, and that he was amply endowed with the most needful quality of an advocate,— to be always strongly and wholly of his present way of thinking, whatever it might be. Next we have, in 1660, "Astræa Redux" on the "happy restoration" of Charles II. In this also we can forebode little of the full-grown Dryden but his defects. We see his tendency to exaggeration, and to confound physical with metaphysical, as where he says of the ships that brought home the royal brothers, that

> "The joyful London meets
> The princely York, himself alone a freight,
> The Swiftsure groans beneath great Gloster's weight," —

and speaks of the

> "Repeated prayer
> Which stormed the skies and ravished Charles from thence."

There is also a certain every-dayness, not to

[1] *Essay on the Origin and Progress of Satire.*

say vulgarity, of phrase, which Dryden never wholly refined away, and which continually tempts us to sum up at once against him as the greatest poet that ever was or could be made wholly out of prose.

> "Heaven would no bargain for its blessings drive"

is an example. On the other hand, there are a few verses almost worthy of his best days, as these: —

> "Some lazy ages lost in sleep and ease,
> No action leave to busy chronicles;
> Such whose *supine felicity* but makes
> In story chasms, in epochas mistakes,
> O'er whom Time gently shakes his wings of down,
> Till with his silent sickle they are mown."

These are all the more noteworthy, that Dryden, unless in argument, is seldom equal for six lines together. In the poem to Lord Clarendon (1662) there are four verses that have something of the "energy divine" for which Pope praised his master.

> "Let envy, then, those crimes within you see
> From which the happy never must be free;
> Envy that does with misery reside,
> The joy and the revenge of ruined pride."

In his "Aurengzebe" (1675) there is a passage, of which, as it is a good example of Dryden, I shall quote the whole, though my purpose aim mainly at the latter verses: —

"When I consider life, 't is all a cheat;
Yet, fooled with Hope, men favor the deceit,
Trust on, and think to-morrow will repay;
To-morrow 's falser than the former day,
Lies worse, and, while it says we shall be blest
With some new joys, cuts off what we possest.
Strange cozenage! none would live past years again,
Yet all hope pleasure in what yet remain,
And from the dregs of life think to receive
What the first sprightly running could not give.
I 'm tired of waiting for this chymic gold
Which fools us young and beggars us when old."

The "first sprightly running" of Dryden's vintage was, it must be confessed, a little muddy, if not beery; but if his own soil did not produce grapes of the choicest flavor, he knew where they were to be had; and his product, like sound wine, grew better the longer it stood upon the lees. He tells us, evidently thinking of himself, that in a poet, "from fifty to threescore, the balance generally holds even in our colder climates, for he loses not much in fancy, and judgment, which is the effect of observation, still increases. His succeeding years afford him little more than the stubble of his own harvest, yet, if his constitution be healthful, his mind may still retain a decent vigor, and the gleanings of that of Ephraim, in comparison with others, will surpass the vintage of Abiezer."[1] Since Chaucer, none of our poets has had a constitution more

[1] Dedication of the *Georgics*.

healthful, and it was his old age that yielded the best of him. In him the understanding was, perhaps, in overplus for his entire good fortune as a poet, and that is a faculty among the earliest to mature. We have seen him, at only ten years, divining the power of reason in Polybius.[1] The same turn of mind led him later to imitate the French school of tragedy, and to admire in Ben Jonson the most correct of English poets. It was his imagination that needed quickening, and it is very curious to trace through his different prefaces the gradual opening of his eyes to the causes of the solitary preëminence of Shakespeare. At first he is sensible of an attraction towards him which he cannot explain, and for which he apologizes, as if it were wrong. But he feels himself drawn more and more strongly, till at last he ceases to resist altogether, and is forced to acknowledge that there is something in this one man that is not and never was anywhere else, something not to be reasoned about, ineffable, divine; if contrary to the rules, so much the worse for *them*. It may be conjectured that Dryden's Puritan associations may have stood in the way of his more properly poetic culture, and that his early knowledge of Shakespeare was slight. He tells us that Davenant, whom

[1] Dryden's penetration is always remarkable. His general judgment of Polybius coincides remarkably with that of Mommsen. (*Röm. Gesch.* ii. 448, *seq.*)

he could not have known before he himself was twenty-seven, first taught him to admire the great poet.[1] But even after his imagination had become conscious of its prerogative, and his expression had been ennobled by frequenting this higher society, we find him continually dropping back into that *sermo pedestris* which seems, on the whole, to have been his more natural element. We always feel his epoch in him, and that he was the lock which let our language down from its point of highest poetry to its level of easiest and most gently flowing prose. His enthusiasm needs the contagion of other minds to arouse it; but his strong sense, his command of the happy word, his wit, which is distinguished by a certain breadth and, as it were, power of generalization, as Pope's by keenness of edge and point, were his, whether he would or no. Accordingly, his poetry is often best and his verse more flowing where (as in parts of his version of the twenty-ninth ode of the third book of Horace) he is amplifying the suggestions of another mind.[2] Viewed from one side, he justi-

[1] Preface to the *Tempest*. He helped Davenant to vulgarize this play.

[2] "I have taken some pains to make it my masterpiece in English." (Preface to *Second Miscellany*.) Fox said that it "was better than the original." J. C. Scaliger said of Erasmus: "Ex alieno ingenio poeta, ex suo versificator." Fox indeed preferred the "Ode to Fortune" above its Horatian original. Dryden has certainly let out a reef or two and given

fies Milton's remark of him, that "he was a good rhymist, but no poet." To look at all sides, and to distrust the verdict of a single mood, is, no doubt, the duty of a critic. But how if a certain side be so often presented as to thrust forward in the memory and disturb it in the effort to recall that total impression (for the office of a critic is not, though often so misunderstood, to say *guilty* or *not guilty* of some particular fact) which is the only safe ground of judgment? It is the weight of the whole man, not of one or the other limb of him, that we want. *Expende Hannibalem.* Very good, but not in a scale capacious only of a single quality at a time, for it is their union, and not their addition, that assures the value of each separately. It was not this or that which gave him his weight in council, his swiftness of decision in battle that outran the forethought of other men, — it was Hannibal. But this prosaic element in Dryden will force itself upon me. As I read him, I cannot help thinking of an ostrich, to be classed with flying things, and capable, what with leap and flap together, of leaving the earth for a longer or shorter space, but loving the open plain, where wing and foot help each other to something that is both flight and run at once. What with his haste and a certain dash,

a fuller sail to the verse. But the elegance? The restrained rather than bellying expanse of phrase? The perfect adequacy without excess?

which, according to our mood, we may call florid or splendid, he seems to stand among poets where Rubens does among painters, — greater, perhaps, as a colorist than an artist, yet great here also, if we compare him with any but the first.

We have arrived at Dryden's thirty-second year, and thus far have found little in him to warrant an augury that he was ever to be one of the *great* names in English literature, the most perfect type, that is, of his class, and that class a high one, though not the highest. If Joseph de Maistre's axiom, *Qui n'a pas vaincu à trente ans, ne vaincra jamais*, were quite true, there would be little hope of him, for he has won no battle yet. But there is something solid and doughty in the man, that can rise from defeat, the stuff of which victories are made in due time, when we are able to choose our position better, and the sun is at our back. Hitherto his performances have been mainly of the *obbligato* sort, at which few men of original force are good, least of all Dryden, who had always something of stiffness in his strength. Waller had praised the living Cromwell in perhaps the manliest verses he ever wrote, — not *very* manly, to be sure, but really elegant, and, on the whole, better than those in which Dryden squeezed out melodious tears. Waller, who had also made himself conspicuous as a volunteer Antony to the country squire turned Cæsar, —

(" With ermine clad and purple, let him hold
A royal sceptre made of Spanish gold "), —

was more servile than Dryden in hailing the return of *ex officio* Majesty. He bewails to Charles, in snuffling heroics, —

" Our sorrow and our crime
To have accepted life so long a time,
Without you here."

A weak man, put to the test by rough and angry times, as Waller was, may be pitied, but meanness is nothing but contemptible under any circumstances. If it be true that " every conqueror creates a Muse," Cromwell was unfortunate. Even Milton's sonnet, though dignified, is reserved if not distrustful. Marvell's " Horatian Ode," the most truly classic in our language, is worthy of its theme. The same poet's " Elegy," in parts noble, and everywhere humanly tender, is worth more than all Carlyle's biography as a witness to the gentler qualities of the hero, and of the deep affection that stalwart nature could inspire in hearts of truly masculine temper. As it is little known, a few verses of it may be quoted to show the difference between grief that thinks of its object and grief that thinks of its rhymes : —

" Valor, religion, friendship, prudence died
At once with him, and all that 's good beside,
And we, death's refuse, nature's dregs, confined
To loathsome life, alas ! are left behind,

Where we (so once we used) shall now no more,
To fetch day, press about his chamber door,
No more shall hear that powerful language charm,
Whose force oft spared the labor of his arm,
No more shall follow where he spent the days
In war or counsel, or in prayer and praise.

. . . . . .

I saw him dead; a leaden slumber lies,
And mortal sleep, over those wakeful eyes;
Those gentle rays under the lids were fled,
Which through his looks that piercing sweetness shed;
That port, which so majestic was and strong,
Loose and deprived of vigor stretched along,
All withered, all discolored, pale, and wan,
How much another thing! no more That Man!
O human glory! vain! O death! O wings!
O worthless world! O transitory things!
Yet dwelt that greatness in his shape decayed
That still, though dead, greater than Death he laid,
And, in his altered face, you something feign
That threatens Death he yet will live again."

Such verses might not satisfy Lindley Murray, but they are of that higher mood which satisfies the heart. These couplets, too, have an energy worthy of Milton's friend: —

"When up the armëd mountains of Dunbar
He marched, and through deep Severn, ending war."

"Thee, many ages hence, in martial verse
Shall the English soldier, ere he charge, rehearse."

On the whole, one is glad that Dryden's panegyric on the Protector was so poor. It was purely official verse-making. Had there

been any feeling in it, there had been baseness in his address to Charles. As it is, we may fairly assume that he was so far sincere in both cases as to be thankful for a chance to exercise himself in rhyme, without much caring whether upon a funeral or a restoration. He might naturally enough expect that poetry would have a better chance under Charles than under Cromwell, or any successor with Commonwealth principles. Cromwell had more serious matters to think about than verses, while Charles might at least care as much about them as it was in his base good nature to care about anything but loose women and spaniels. Dryden's sound sense, afterwards so conspicuous, shows itself even in these pieces, when we can get at it through the tangled thicket of tropical phrase. But the authentic and unmistakable Dryden first manifests himself in some verses addressed to his friend Dr. Charlton in 1663. We have first his common sense which has almost the point of wit, yet with a tang of prose: —

"The longest tyranny that ever swayed
Was that wherein our ancestors betrayed
Their freeborn reason to the Stagyrite,
And made his torch their universal light.
So truth, while only one supplied the state,
Grew scarce and dear and yet sophisticate.
Still it was bought, like emp'ric wares or charms,
Hard words sealed up with Aristotle's arms."

Then we have his easy plenitude of fancy, where he speaks of the inhabitants of the New World as

> "Guiltless men who danced away their time,
> Fresh as their groves and happy as their clime."

And, finally, there is a hint of imagination where "mighty visions of the Danish race" watch round Charles sheltered in Stonehenge after the battle of Worcester. These passages might have been written by the Dryden whom we learn to know fifteen years later. They have the advantage that he wrote them to please himself. His contemporary, Dr. Heylin, said of French cooks, that "their trade was not to feed the belly, but the palate." Dryden was a great while in learning this secret, as available in good writing as in cookery. He strove after it, but his thoroughly English nature, to the last, would too easily content itself with serving up the honest beef of his thought, without regard to daintiness of flavor in the dressing of it.[1] Of the best English poetry, it might be said that it is understanding

[1] In one of the last letters he ever wrote, thanking his cousin Mrs. Steward for a gift of marrow-puddings, he says: "A chine of honest bacon would please my appetite more than all the marrow-puddings; for I like them better plain, having a very vulgar stomach." So of Cowley he says: "There was plenty enough, but ill sorted, whole pyramids of sweetmeats for boys and women, but little of solid meat for men." The physical is a truer anti-type of the spiritual man than we are willing to admit, and the brain is often forced to acknowledge the inconvenient country-cousinship of the stomach.

aërated by imagination. In Dryden the solid part too often refused to mix kindly with the leaven, either remaining lumpish or rising to a hasty puffiness. Grace and lightness were with him much more a laborious achievement than a natural gift, and it is all the more remarkable that he should so often have attained to what seems such an easy perfection in both. Always a hasty writer,[1] he was long in forming his style, and to the last was apt to snatch the readiest word rather than wait for the fittest. He was not wholly and unconsciously poet, but a thinker who sometimes lost himself on enchanted ground and was transfigured by its touch. This preponderance in him of the reasoning over the intuitive faculties, the one always there, the other flashing in when you least expect it, accounts for that inequality and even incongruousness in his writing which makes one revise one's judgment at every tenth page. In his prose you come upon passages that persuade you he is a poet, in spite of his verses so often turning state's evidence against him as to convince you he is none. He is a prose-writer, with a kind of Æolian attach-

[1] In his preface to *All for Love*, he says, evidently alluding to himself: "If he have a friend whose hastiness in writing is his greatest fault, Horace would have taught him to have minced the matter, and to have called it readiness of thought and a flowing fancy." And in the Preface to the *Fables* he says of Homer: "This vehemence of his, I confess, is more suitable to my temper." He makes other allusions to it.

ment. For example, take this bit of prose from the dedication of his version of Virgil's "Pastorals," 1694: "He found the strength of his genius betimes, and was even in his youth preluding to his Georgicks and his Æneis. He could not forbear to try his wings, though his pinions were not hardened to maintain a long, laborious flight; yet sometimes they bore him to a pitch as lofty as ever he was able to reach afterwards. But when he was admonished by his subject to descend, he came down gently circling in the air and singing to the ground, like a lark melodious in her mounting and continuing her song till she alights, still preparing for a higher flight at her next sally, and tuning her voice to better music." This is charming, and yet even this wants the ethereal tincture that pervades the style of Jeremy Taylor, making it, as Burke said of Sheridan's eloquence, "neither prose nor poetry, but something better than either." Let us compare Taylor's treatment of the same image, which, I fancy, Dryden must have seen: "For so have I seen a lark rising from his bed of grass and soaring upwards, singing as he rises, and hopes to get to heaven and climb above the clouds; but the poor bird was beaten back by the loud sighings of an eastern wind, and his motion made irregular and inconstant, descending more at every breath of the tempest than it could recover by the libration

and frequent weighing of his wings, till the little creature was forced to sit down and pant, and stay till the storm was over, and then it made a prosperous flight, and did rise and sing as if it had learned music and motion of an angel as he passed sometimes through the air about his ministries here below." Taylor's fault is that his sentences too often smell of the library, but what an open air is here! How unpremeditated it all seems! How carelessly he knots each new thought, as it comes, to the one before it with an *and*, like a girl making lace! And what a slidingly musical use he makes of the sibilants with which our language is unjustly taxed by those who can only make them hiss, not sing! There are twelve of them in the first twenty words, fifteen of which are monosyllables. We notice the structure of Dryden's periods, but this grows up as we read. It gushes, like the song of the bird itself, —

> " In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.'

Let us now take a specimen of Dryden's bad prose from one of his poems. I open the "Annus Mirabilis" at random, and hit upon this: —

> " Our little fleet was now engaged so far,
> That, like the swordfish in the whale, they fought:
> The combat only seemed a civil war,
> Till through their bowels we our passage wrought."

Is this Dryden, or Sternhold, or Shadwell, those Toms who made him say that " dulness was fatal

to the name of Tom"? The natural history of Goldsmith in the verse of Pye! His thoughts did not "voluntary move harmonious numbers." He had his choice between prose and verse, and seems to be poetical on second thought. I do not speak without book. He was more than half conscious of it himself. In the same letter to Mrs. Steward, just cited, he says, "I am still drudging on, always a poet and never a good one"; and this from no mock-modesty, for he is always handsomely frank in telling us whatever of his own doing pleased him. This was written in the last year of his life, and at about the same time he says elsewhere: "What judgment I had increases rather than diminishes, and thoughts, such as they are, come crowding in so fast upon me that my only difficulty is to choose or to reject, to run them into verse or to give them the other harmony of prose; I have so long studied and practised both, that they are grown into a habit and become familiar to me." [1] I think that a man who was primarily a poet would hardly have felt this equanimity of choice.

I find a confirmation of this feeling about Dryden in his early literary loves. His taste was not an instinct, but the slow result of reflection and of the manfulness with which he always acknowledged to himself his own mistakes. In this latter respect few men deal so magnani-

[1] Preface to the *Fables*.

mously with themselves as he, and accordingly few have been so happily inconsistent. *Ancora imparo* might have served him for a motto as well as Michel Angelo. His prefaces are a complete log of his life, and the habit of writing them was a useful one to him, for it forced him to think with a pen in his hand, which, according to Goethe, "if it do no other good, keeps the mind from staggering about." In these prefaces we see his taste gradually rising from Du Bartas to Spenser, from Cowley to Milton, from Corneille to Shakespeare. "I remember when I was a boy," he says in his dedication of the "Spanish Friar," 1681, "I thought inimitable Spenser a mean poet in comparison of Sylvester's Du Bartas, and was rapt into an ecstasy when I read these lines: —

> "'Now when the winter's keener breath began
> To crystallize the Baltic oceän,
> To glaze the lakes, to bridle up the floods,
> And periwig with snow [1] the baldpate woods.'

I am much deceived if this be not abominable fustian." Swift, in his "Tale of a Tub," has a

[1] *Wool* is Sylvester's word. Dryden reminds us of Burke in this also, that he always quotes from memory and seldom exactly. His memory was better for things than for words. This helps to explain the length of time it took him to master that vocabulary at last so various, full, and seemingly extemporaneous. He is a large quoter, though, with his usual inconsistency, he says, "I am no admirer of quotations." (*Essay on Heroic Plays.*)

ludicrous passage in this style: "Look on this globe of earth, you will find it to be a very complete and fashionable dress. What is that which some call *land* but a fine coat faced with green? or the *sea*, but a waistcoat of water-tabby? Proceed to the particular works of creation, you will find how curious journeyman Nature has been to trim up the vegetable *beaux;* observe how *sparkish a periwig adorns the head of a beech*, and what a fine doublet of white satin is worn by the birch." The fault is not in any inaptness of the images, nor in the mere vulgarity of the things themselves, but in that of the associations they awaken. The "prithee, undo this button" of Lear, coming where it does and expressing what it does, is one of those touches of the pathetically sublime, of which only Shakespeare ever knew the secret. Herrick, too, has a charming poem on "Julia's petticoat," the charm being that he exalts the familiar and the low to the region of sentiment. In the passage from Sylvester, it is precisely the reverse, and the wig takes as much from the sentiment as it adds to a Lord Chancellor. So Pope's proverbial verse —

"True wit is Nature to advantage drest" —

unpleasantly suggests Nature under the hands of a lady's-maid.[1] We have no word in English

[1] In the *Epimetheus* of a poet usually as elegant as Gray himself, one's finer sense is a little jarred by the

"Spectral gleam their snow-white *dresses.*"

that will exactly define this want of propriety in diction. *Vulgar* is too strong, and *commonplace* too weak. Perhaps *bourgeois* comes as near as any. It is to be noticed that Dryden does not unequivocally condemn the passage he quotes, but qualifies it with an "if I am not much mistaken." Indeed, though his judgment in substantials, like that of Johnson, is always worth having, his taste, the negative half of genius, never altogether refined itself from a colloquial familiarity, which is one of the charms of his prose, and gives that air of easy strength in which his satire is unmatched. In his "Royal Martyr" (1669), the tyrant Maximin says to the gods: —

> "Keep you your rain and sunshine in the skies,
> And I'll keep back my flame and sacrifice;
> *Your trade of Heaven shall soon be at a stand,*
> *And all your goods lie dead upon your hand,*" —

a passage which has as many faults as only Dryden was capable of committing, even to a false idiom forced by the last rhyme. The same tyrant in dying exclaims: —

> "And after thee I'll go,
> Revenging still, an following e'en to th' other world my blow,
> And, *shoving back this earth on which I sit,*
> *I'll mount and scatter all the gods I hit.*"

In the "Conquest of Granada" (1670), we have: —

"This little loss in our vast body shews
So small, that half *have never heard the news;*
Fame 's out of breath e'er she can fly so far
To tell 'em all that you have e'er made war." [1]

And in the same play, —

"That busy thing,
The soul, is packing up, and just on wing
Like parting swallows when they seek the spring," —

where the last sweet verse curiously illustrates that inequality (poetry on a prose background) which so often puzzles us in Dryden. Infinitely worse is the speech of Almanzor to his mother's ghost: —

"I 'll rush into the covert of the night
And pull thee backward by the shroud to light,
Or else I 'll squeeze thee like a bladder there,
And make thee groan thyself away to air."

What wonder that Dryden should have been substituted for Davenant as the butt of the "Rehearsal," and that the parody should have had such a run? And yet it was Dryden who,

[1] This probably suggested to Young the grandiose image in his *Last Day* (bk. ii.): —

"Those overwhelming armies . . .
Whose rear lay wrapt in night, while breaking dawn
Roused the broad front and called the battle on."

This, to be sure, is no plagiarism; but it should be carried to Dryden's credit that we catch the poets of the next half century oftener with their hands in his pockets than in those of any one else.

in speaking of Persius, hit upon the happy phrase of "boisterous metaphors";[1] it was Dryden who said of Cowley, whom he elsewhere calls "the darling of my youth,"[2] that he was "sunk in reputation because he could never forgive any conceit which came in his way, but swept, like a drag-net, great and small."[3] But the passages I have thus far cited as specimens of our poet's coarseness (for poet he surely was *intus*, though not always *in cute*) were written before he was forty, and he had an

[1] *Essay on Satire.* [2] Ibid.

[3] Preface to *Fables*. Men are always inclined to revenge themselves on their old idols in the first enthusiasm of conversion to a purer faith. Cowley had all the faults that Dryden loads him with, and yet his popularity was to some extent deserved. He at least had a theory that poetry should soar, not creep, and longed for some expedient, in the failure of natural wings, by which he could lift himself away from the conventional and commonplace. By beating out the substance of Pindar very thin, he contrived a kind of balloon which, tumid with gas, did certainly mount a little, *into* the clouds, if not above them, though sure to come suddenly down with a bump. His odes, indeed, are an alternation of upward jerks and concussions, and smack more of Chapelain than of the Theban, but his prose is very agreeable, — Montaigne and water, perhaps, but with some flavor of the Gascon wine left. The strophe of his ode to Dr. Scarborough, in which he compares his surgical friend, operating for the stone, to Moses striking the rock, more than justifies all the ill that Dryden could lay at his door. It was into precisely such mud-holes that Cowley's Will-o'-the-Wisp had misguided him. Men may never wholly shake off a vice but they are always conscious of it, and hate the tempter.

odd notion, suitable to his healthy complexion, that poets on the whole improve after that date. Man at forty, he says, "seems to be fully in his summer tropic, . . . and I believe that it will hold in all great poets that, though they wrote before with a certain heat of genius which inspired them, yet that heat was not perfectly digested."[1] But artificial heat is never to be digested at all, as is plain in Dryden's case. He was a man who warmed slowly, and, in his hurry to supply the market, forced his mind. The result was the same after forty as before. In "Œdipus" (1679) we find —

> "Not one bolt
> Shall err from Thebes, but more be called for, more,
> *New-moulded thunder of a larger size!*"

This play was written in conjunction with Lee, of whom Dryden relates[2] that, when some one said to him, "It is easy enough to write like a madman," he replied, "No, it is hard to write like a madman, but easy enough to write like a fool,"— perhaps the most compendious lecture on poetry ever delivered. The splendid bit of eloquence, which has so much the sheet-iron clang of impeachment thunder (I hope that Dryden is not in the Library of Congress!) is perhaps Lee's. The following passage almost certainly is his: —

[1] Dedication of *Georgics*.

[2] In a letter to Dennis, 1693.

> "Sure 't is the end of all things! Fate has torn
> The lock of Time off, and his head is now
> The ghastly ball of round Eternity!"

But the next, in which the soul is likened to the pocket of an indignant housemaid charged with theft, is wholly in Dryden's manner: —

> "No; I dare challenge heaven to turn me outward,
> And shake my soul quite empty in your sight."

In the same style, he makes his Don Sebastian (1690) say that he is as much astonished as "drowsy mortals" at the last trump, —

> "When, called in haste, *they fumble for their limbs*," —

and propose to take upon himself the whole of a crime shared with another by asking Heaven *to charge the bill* on him. And in "King Arthur," written ten years after the Preface from which I have quoted his confession about Du Bartas, we have a passage precisely of the kind he condemned: —

> "Ah for the many souls as but this morn
> Were clothed with flesh and warmed with vital blood,
> But naked now, or *shirted* but with air."

Dryden too often violated his own admirable rule, that "an author is not to write all he can, but only all he ought." [1] In his worst images, however, there is often a vividness that half excuses them. But it is a grotesque vividness,

[1] Preface to *Fables*.

as from the flare of a bonfire. They do not flash into sudden lustre, as in the great poets, where the imaginations of poet and reader leap toward each other and meet halfway.

English prose is indebted to Dryden for having freed it from the cloister of pedantry. He, more than any other single writer, contributed, as well by precept as example, to give it suppleness of movement and the easier air of the modern world. His own style, juicy with proverbial phrases, has that familiar dignity, so hard to attain, perhaps unattainable except by one who, like Dryden, feels that his position is assured. Charles Cotton is as easy, but not so elegant; Walton as familiar, but not so flowing; Swift as idiomatic, but not so elevated; Burke more splendid, but not so equally luminous. That his style was no easy acquisition (though, of course, the aptitude was innate) he himself tells us. In his dedication of "Troilus and Cressida" (1679), where he seems to hint at the erection of an Academy, he says that "the perfect knowledge of a tongue was never attained by any single person. The Court, the College, and the Town must all be joined in it. And as our English is a composition of the dead and living tongues, there is required a perfect knowledge, not only of the Greek and Latin, but of the Old German, French, and Italian, and to help all these, a conversation with those authors of our

own who have written with the fewest faults in prose and verse. But how barbarously we yet write and speak your Lordship knows, and I am sufficiently sensible in my own English.[1] For I am often put to a stand in considering whether what I write be the idiom of the tongue, or false grammar and nonsense couched beneath that specious name of *Anglicism*, and have no other way to clear my doubts but by translating my English into Latin, and thereby trying what sense the words will bear in a more stable language." *Tantae molis erat.* Five years later: "The proprieties and delicacies of the English are known to few; it is impossible even for a good wit to understand and practise them without the help of a liberal education, long reading and digesting of those few good authors we have amongst us, the knowledge of men and manners, *the freedom of habitudes and conversation with the best company of both sexes*, and, in short, without wearing off the rust which he contracted while he was laying in a stock of learning." In the passage I have italicized, it

[1] More than half a century later, Orrery, in his "Remarks" on Swift, says: "We speak and we write at random; and if a man's common conversation were committed to paper, he would be startled *for to* find himself guilty in *so few* sentences of so many solecisms and such false English." I do not remember *for to* anywhere in Dryden's prose. *So few* has long been denizened; no wonder, since it is nothing more than *si peu* Anglicized.

will be seen that Dryden lays some stress upon the influence of women in refining language. Swift, also, in his plan for an Academy, says: "Now, though I would by no means give the ladies the trouble of advising us in the reformation of our language, yet I cannot help thinking that, since they have been left out of all meetings except parties at play, or where worse designs are carried on, our conversation has very much degenerated."[1] Swift affirms that the language had grown corrupt since the Restoration, and that "the Court, which used to be the standard of propriety and correctness of speech, was then, and, I think, has ever since continued, the worst school in England."[2] He lays the

[1] Letter to the Lord High Treasurer.

[2] Ibid. He complains of "manglings and abbreviations." "What does your Lordship think of the words drudg'd, disturb'd, rebuk'd, fledg'd, and a thousand others?" In a contribution to the *Tatler* (No. 230) he ridicules the use of *'um* for *them*, and a number of slang phrases, among which is *mob*. "The war," he says, "has introduced abundance of polysyllables, which will never be able to live many more campaigns." *Speculations*, *operations*, *preliminaries*, *ambassadors*, *pallisadoes*, *communication*, *circumvallation*, *battalions*, are the instances he gives, and all are now familiar. No man, or body of men, can dam the stream of language. Dryden is rather fond of *'em* for *them*, but uses it rarely in his prose. Swift himself prefers *'t is* to *it is*, as does Emerson still. In what Swift says of the poets, he may be fairly suspected of glancing at Dryden, who was his kinsman, and whose prefaces and translation of Virgil he ridicules in the *Tale of a Tub*. Dry-

blame partly on the general licentiousness, partly upon the French education of many of Charles's courtiers, and partly on the poets. Dryden undoubtedly formed his diction by the usage of the Court. The age was a very free-and-easy, not to say a very coarse one. Its coarseness was not external, like that of Elizabeth's day, but the outward mark of an inward depravity. What Swift's notion of the refinement of women was may be judged by his anecdotes of Stella. I will not say that Dryden's prose did not gain by the conversational elasticity which his frequenting men and women of the world enabled him to give it. It is the best specimen of every-day style that we have. But the habitual dwelling of his mind in a commonplace atmosphere, and among those easy levels of sentiment which befitted Will's Coffee-house and the Bird-cage Walk, was a damage to his poetry. Solitude is as needful to the imagination as society is wholesome for the character. He cannot always distinguish between enthusiasm and extravagance

den is reported to have said of him, "Cousin Swift is no poet." The Dean began his literary career by Pindaric odes to Athenian Societies and the like, — perhaps the greatest mistake as to his own powers of which an author was ever guilty. It was very likely that he would send these to his relative, already distinguished, for his opinion upon them. If this was so, the justice of Dryden's judgment must have added to the smart. Swift never forgot or forgave; Dryden was careless enough to do the one, and large enough to do the other.

when he sees them. But apart from these influences which I have adduced in exculpation, there was certainly a vein of coarseness in him, a want of that exquisite sensitiveness which is the conscience of the artist. An old gentleman, writing to the "Gentleman's Magazine" in 1745, professes to remember "plain John Dryden (before he paid his court with success to the great) in one uniform clothing of Norwich drugget. I have eat tarts at the Mulberry Garden with him and Madam Reeve, when our author advanced to a sword and Chadreux wig." [1] I always fancy Dryden in the drugget, with wig, lace ruffles, and sword superimposed. It is the type of this curiously incongruous man.

[1] Both Malone and Scott accept this gentleman's evidence without question, but I confess suspicion of a memory that runs back more than eighty-one years, and recollects a man before he had any claim to remembrance. Dryden was never poor, and there is at Oxford a portrait of him painted in 1664, which represents him in a superb periwig and laced band. This was "before he had paid his court with success to the great." But the story is at least *ben trovato*, and morally true enough to serve as an illustration. Who the "old gentleman" was has never been discovered. Of Crowne (who has some interest for us as a sometime student at Harvard) he says: "Many a cup of metheglin have I drank with little starch'd Johnny Crown; we called him so, from the stiff, unalterable primness of his long cravat." Crowne reflects no more credit on his Alma Mater than Downing. Both were sneaks, and of such a kind as, I think, can only be produced by a debauched Puritanism. Crowne, as a rival of Dryden, is contemptuously alluded to by Cibber in his *Apology*.

The first poem by which Dryden won a general acknowledgment of his power was the "Annus Mirabilis," written in his thirty-seventh year. Pepys, himself not altogether a bad judge, doubtless expresses the common opinion when he says: "I am very well pleased this night with reading a poem I brought home with me last night from Westminster Hall, of Dryden's, upon the present war; a very good poem." [1] And a very good poem, in some sort, it continues to be, in spite of its amazing blemishes. We must always bear in mind that Dryden lived in an age that supplied him with no ready-made inspiration, and that big phrases and images are apt to be pressed into the service when great ones do not volunteer. With this poem begins the long series of Dryden's prefaces, of which Swift made such excellent, though malicious, fun that I cannot forbear to quote it. "I do utterly disapprove and declare against that pernicious custom of making the *preface* a bill of fare to the book. For I have always looked upon it as a high point of indiscretion in monster-mongers and other retailers of strange sights to hang out a fair picture over the door, drawn after the life, with a most eloquent de-

[1] *Diary*, iii. 390. Almost the only notices of Dryden that make him alive to me I have found in the delicious book of this Polonius-Montaigne, the only man who ever had the courage to keep a sincere journal, even under the shelter of cipher.

scription underneath; this has saved me many a threepence. . . . Such is exactly the fate at this time of *prefaces*. . . . This expedient was admirable at first; our great Dryden has long carried it as far as it would go, and with incredible success. He has often said to me in confidence, 'that the world would never have suspected him to be so great a poet, if he had not assured them so frequently, in his prefaces, that it was impossible they could either doubt or forget it.' Perhaps it may be so; however, I much fear his instructions have edified out of their place, and taught men to grow wiser in certain points where he never intended they should."[1] The *monster-mongers* is a terrible thrust, when we remember some of the comedies and heroic plays which Dryden ushered in this fashion. In the dedication of the "Annus" to the city of London is one of those pithy sentences of which Dryden is ever afterwards so full, and which he lets fall with a carelessness that seems always to deepen the meaning: "I have heard, indeed, of some virtuous persons who have ended unfortunately, but never of any virtuous nation; Providence is engaged too deeply when the cause becomes so general."

[1] *Tale of a Tub*, sect. v. Pepys also speaks of buying the *Maiden Queen* of Mr. Dryden's, which he himself, in his preface, seems to brag of, and indeed is a good play. (18th January, 1668.)

In his "account" of the poem in a letter to Sir Robert Howard he says: "I have chosen to write my poem in quatrains or stanzas of four in alternate rhyme, because I have ever judged them more noble and of greater dignity, both for the sound and number, than any other verse in use amongst us. . . . The learned languages have certainly a great advantage of us in not being tied to the slavery of any rhyme. . . . But in this necessity of our rhymes, I have always found the couplet verse most easy, though not so proper for this occasion; for there the work is sooner at an end, every two lines concluding the labor of the poet." A little further on: "They [the French] write in alexandrines, or verses of six feet, such as amongst us is the old translation of Homer by Chapman: all which, by lengthening their chain,[1] makes the

[1] He is fond of this image. In the *Maiden Queen* Celadon tells Sabina that, when he is with her rival Florimel, his heart is still her prisoner, "it only draws a longer chain after it." Goldsmith's fancy was taken by it; and everybody admires in the "Traveller" the extraordinary conceit of a heart dragging a lengthening chain. The smoothness of too many rhymed pentameters is that of thin ice over shallow water; so long as we glide along rapidly, all is well; but if we dwell a moment on any one spot, we may find ourselves knee-deep in mud. A later poet, in trying to improve on Goldsmith, shows the ludicrousness of the image: —

"And round my heart's leg ties its galling chain."

To write imaginatively a man should have — imagination!

sphere of their activity the greater." I have quoted these passages because, in a small compass, they include several things characteristic of Dryden. "I have ever judged," and "I have always found," are particularly so. If he took up an opinion in the morning, he would have found so many arguments for it before night that it would seem already old and familiar. So with his reproach of rhyme; a year or two before he was eagerly defending it;[1] again a few years, and he will utterly condemn and drop it in his plays, while retaining it in his translations; afterwards his study of Milton leads him to think that blank verse would suit the epic style better, and he proposes to try it with Homer, but at last translates one book as a specimen, and behold, it is in rhyme! But the charm of this great advocate is, that, whatever side he was on, he could always find excellent reasons for it, and state them with great force and abundance of happy illustration. He is an exception to the proverb, and is none the worse pleader that he is always pleading his own cause. The blunder about Chapman is of a kind into which his hasty temperament often betrayed him. He remembered that Chapman's "Iliad" was in a long measure, concluded with-

[1] See his epistle dedicatory to the *Rival Ladies* (1664). For the other side, see particularly a passage in his *Discourse on Epic Poetry* (1697).

out looking that it was alexandrine, and then attributes it generally to his "Homer." Chapman's "Iliad" is done in fourteen-syllable verse, and his "Odyssee" in the very metre that Dryden himself used in his own version.[1] I remark also what he says of the couplet, that it was easy because the second verse concludes the labor of the poet. And yet it was Dryden who found it hard for that very reason. His vehement abundance refused those narrow banks, first running over into a triplet, and, even then uncontainable, rising to an alexandrine in the concluding verse. And I have little doubt that it was the roominess, rather than the dignity, of the quatrain which led him to choose it. As apposite to this, I may quote what he elsewhere says of octosyllabic verse: "The thought can turn itself with greater ease in a larger compass. When the rhyme comes too thick upon us, it

[1] In the same way he had two years before assumed that Shakespeare "was the first who, to shun the pains of continued rhyming, invented that kind of writing which we call blank verse"! Dryden was never, I suspect, a very careful student of English literature. He seems never to have known that Surrey translated a part of the *Æneid* (and with great spirit) into blank verse. Indeed, he was not a scholar, in the proper sense of the word, but he had that faculty of rapid assimilation without study, so remarkable in Coleridge and other rich minds, whose office is rather to impregnate than to invent. These brokers of thought perform a great office in literature, second only to that of originators.

straitens the expression : we are thinking of the close, when we should be employed in adorning the thought. It makes a poet giddy with turning in a space too narrow for his imagination." [1]

Dryden himself, as was not always the case with him, was well satisfied with his work. He calls it his best hitherto, and attributes his success to the excellence of his subject, "incomparably the best he had ever had, *excepting only the Royal Family*." The first part is devoted to the Dutch war; the last to the fire of London. The martial half is infinitely the better of the two. He altogether surpasses his model, Davenant. If his poem lack the gravity of thought attained by a few stanzas of "Gondibert," it is vastly superior in life, in picturesqueness, in the energy of single lines, and, above all, in imagination. Few men have read "Gondibert," and almost every one speaks of it, as commonly of the dead, with a certain subdued respect. And it deserves respect as an honest effort to bring poetry back to its highest office in the ideal treatment of life. Davenant emulated Spenser, and if his poem had been as good as his preface, it could still be read in another spirit than

[1] *Essay on Satire*. What he has said just before this about Butler is worth noting. Butler had had a chief hand in the *Rehearsal*, but Dryden had no grudges where the question was of giving its just praise to merit.

that of investigation. As it is, it always reminds me of Goldsmith's famous verse. It is remote, unfriendly, solitary, and, above all, slow. Its shining passages, for there are such, remind one of distress-rockets sent up at intervals from a ship just about to founder, and sadden rather than cheer.[1]

The first part of the "Annus Mirabilis" is by no means clear of the false taste of the time,[2] though it has some of Dryden's manliest verses and happiest comparisons, always his two distinguishing merits. Here, as almost everywhere else in Dryden, measuring him merely as poet, we recall what he, with pathetic pride, says of himself in the prologue to "Aurengzebe": —

> "Let him retire, betwixt two ages cast,
> The first of this, the hindmost of the last."

[1] The conclusion of the second canto of Book Third is the best continuously fine passage. Dryden's poem has nowhere so much meaning in so small space as Davenant, when he says of the sense of honor that, —

> "Like Power, it grows to nothing, growing less."

Davenant took the hint of the stanza from Sir John Davies. Wyatt first used it, so far as I know, in English.

[2] Perhaps there is no better lecture on the prevailing vices of style and thought (if thought this frothy ferment of the mind may be called) than in Cotton Mather's *Magnalia*. For Mather, like a true provincial, appropriates only the mannerism, and, as is usual in such cases, betrays all its weakness by the unconscious parody of exaggeration.

What can be worse than what he says of comets? —

> "Whether they unctuous exhalations are
> Fired by the sun, or seeming so alone,
> Or each some more remote and slippery star
> Which loses footing when to mortals shown."

Or than this, of the destruction of the Dutch India ships? —

> "Amidst whole heaps of spices lights a ball,
> And now their odors armed against them fly;
> Some preciously by shattered porcelain fall,
> And some by aromatic splinters die."

Dear Dr. Johnson had his doubts about Shakespeare, but here at least was poetry! This is one of the quatrains which he pronounces "worthy of our author."[1]

But Dryden himself has said that "a man who is resolved to praise an author with any appearance of justice must be sure to take him on the strongest side, and where he is least liable

[1] The Doctor was a capital judge of the substantial value of the goods he handled, but his judgment always seems that of the thumb and forefinger. For the shades, the disposition of colors, the beauty of the figures, he has as good as no sense whatever. The critical parts of his *Life of Dryden* seem to me the best of his writing in this kind. There is little to be gleaned after him. He had studied his author, which he seldom did, and his criticism is sympathetic, a thing still rarer with him. As illustrative of his own habits, his remarks on Dryden's reading are curious.

to exceptions." This is true also of one who wishes to measure an author fairly, for the higher wisdom of criticism lies in the capacity to admire.

> Leser, wie gefall ich dir?
> Leser, wie gefällst du mir? —

are both fair questions, the answer to the first being more often involved in that to the second than is sometimes thought. The poet in Dryden was never more fully revealed than in such verses as these: —

"And threatening France, placed like a painted Jove,[1]
Kept idle thunder in his lifted hand";

"Silent in smoke of cannon they come on";

[1] Perhaps the hint was given by a phrase of Corneille, *monarque en peinture*. Dryden seldom borrows, unless from Shakespeare, without improving, and he borrowed a great deal. Thus in *Don Sebastian* (of suicide): —

> "Brutus and Cato might discharge their souls,
> And give them furloughs for the other world;
> But we, like sentries, are obliged to stand
> In starless nights and wait the appointed hour."

The thought is Cicero's, but how it is intensified by the "starless nights"! Dryden, I suspect, got it from his favorite, Montaigne, who says, "Que nous ne pouvons abandonner cette garnison du monde, sans le commandement exprez de celuy qui nous y a mis." (Lib. ii. chap. 3.) In the same play, by a very Drydenish verse, he gives new force to an old comparison: —

> "And I should break through laws divine and human,
> And think 'em cobwebs spread for little man,
> *Which all the bulky herd of Nature breaks.*"

"And his loud guns speak thick, like angry men";

"The vigorous seaman every port-hole plies,
And adds his heart to every gun he fires";

"And, though to me unknown, they sure fought well,
Whom Rupert led, and who were British born."

This is masculine writing, and yet it must be said that there is scarcely a quatrain in which the rhyme does not trip him into a platitude, and there are too many swaggering with that *expression forte d'un sentiment faible* which Voltaire condemns in Corneille, — a temptation to which Dryden always lay too invitingly open. But there are passages higher in kind than any I have cited, because they show imagination. Such are the verses in which he describes the dreams of the disheartened enemy: —

"In dreams they fearful precipices tread,
Or, shipwrecked, labor to some distant shore,
Or in dark churches walk among the dead"; —

and those in which he recalls glorious memories, and sees where

"The mighty ghosts of our great Harries rose,
And armëd Edwards looked with anxious eyes."

A few verses, like the pleasantly alliterative one in which he makes the spider, "from the silent ambush of his den," "feel far off the trembling of his thread," show that he was beginning to study the niceties of verse, instead of trusting wholly to what he would have called

his natural *fougue*. On the whole, this part of the poem is very good war poetry, as war poetry goes (for there is but one first-rate poem of the kind in English, — short, national, eager as if the writer were personally engaged, with the rapid metre of a drum beating the charge, — and that is Drayton's "Battle of Agincourt" [1]), but it shows more study of Lucan than of Virgil, and for a long time yet we shall find Dryden bewildered by bad models. He is always imitating — no, that is not the word, always emulating — somebody in his more strictly poetical attempts, for in that direction he always needed some external impulse to set his mind in motion. This is more or less true of all authors; nor does it detract from their originality, which depends wholly on their being able so far to forget themselves as to let something of themselves slip into what they write.[2] In his prologue to "Albumazar" Dryden himself says of Ben Jonson, —

> "But Ben made nobly his what he did mould,
> What was another's lead becomes his gold."

The wise will call *mould* as good a euphemism

[1] Not his solemn historical droning under that title, but addressed "To the Cambrio-Britons on their harp."

[2] "Les poëtes euxmêmes s'animent et s'échauffent par la lecture des autres poëtes. Messieurs de Malherbe, Corneille, etc., se disposoient au travail par la lecture des poëtes qui étoient de leur gout." (Vigneul-Marvilliana, i. 64, 65.)

as *convey!* Of absolute originality we will not speak till authors are raised by some Deucalion-and-Pyrrha process; and even then our faith would be small, for writers who have no past are pretty sure of having no future. Dryden, at any rate, always had to have his copy set him at the top of the page, and wrote ill or well accordingly. His mind (somewhat solid for a poet) warmed slowly, but, once fairly heated through, he had more of that good luck of self-oblivion than most men. He certainly gave even a liberal interpretation to Molière's rule of taking his own property wherever he found it, though he sometimes blundered awkwardly about what was properly *his;* but in literature, it should be remembered, a thing always becomes his at last who says it best, and thus makes it his own.[1]

[1] For example, Waller had said,—

> "Others may use the ocean as their road,
> Only the English *make it their abode;*
> . . . . . .
> We *tread on billows with a steady foot,*"—

long before Campbell. Campbell helps himself to both thoughts, enlivens them into

> "Her march is o'er the mountain wave,
> Her home is on the deep,"—

and they are his forevermore. His "leviathans afloat" he *lifted* from the *Annus Mirabilis;* but in what court could Dryden sue? Again, Waller in another poem calls the Duke of York's flag

> "His dreadful streamer, like a comet's hair";—

Mr. Savage Landor once told me that he said to Wordsworth: "Mr. Wordsworth, a man may mix poetry with prose as much as he pleases, and it will only elevate and enliven; but the moment he mixes a particle of prose with his poetry, it precipitates the whole." Wordsworth, he added, never forgave him. The always hasty Dryden, as I think I have already said, was liable, like a careless apothecary's 'prentice, to make the same confusion of ingredients, especially in the more mischievous way. I cannot leave the "Annus Mirabilis" without giving an example of this. Describing the Dutch prizes, rather like an auctioneer than a poet, he says that

> "Some English wool, vexed in a Belgian loom,
> And into cloth of spongy softness made,
> Did into France or colder Denmark doom,
> To ruin with worse ware our staple trade."

One might fancy this written by the secretary of a board of trade in an unguarded moment; and this, I believe, is the first application of the celestial portent to this particular comparison. Yet Milton's "imperial ensign" waves defiant behind his impregnable lines, and even Campbell flaunts his "meteor flag" in Waller's face. Gray's bard might be sent to the lock-up, but even he would find bail.

"C'est imiter quelqu'un que de planter des choux."

"The lyrical cry" which has lately become as iteratively tedious in the fields of criticism as that of the cicala in those of Italy may perhaps be traced to the "lyric-liring cries" of Sidney's *Arcadia*.

but we should remember that the poem is dedicated to the city of London. The depreciation of the rival fabrics is exquisite; and Dryden, the most English of our poets, would not be so thoroughly English if he had not in him some fibre of *la nation boutiquière*. Let us now see how he succeeds in attempting to infuse science (the most obstinately prosy material) with poetry. Speaking of "a more exact knowledge of the longitudes," as he explains in a note, he tells us that, —

> "Then we upon our globe's last verge shall go,
> And view the ocean leaning on the sky;
> From thence our rolling neighbors we shall know,
> And on the lunar world securely pry."

Dr. Johnson confesses that he does not understand this. Why should he, when it is plain that Dryden was wholly in the dark himself? To understand it is none of my business, but I confess that it interests me as an Americanism. We have hitherto been credited as the inventors of the "jumping-off place" at the extreme western verge of the world. But Dryden was beforehand with us. Though he doubtless knew that the earth was a sphere (and perhaps that it was flattened at the poles), it was always a flat surface in his fancy. In his "Amphitryon," he makes Alcmena say: —

> "No, I would fly thee to the ridge of earth,
> And leap the precipice to 'scape thy sight."

And in his "Spanish Friar," Lorenzo says to Elvira that they "will travel together to the ridge of the world, and then drop together into the next." It is idle for us poor Yankees to hope that we can invent anything. To say sooth, if Dryden had left nothing behind him but the "Annus Mirabilis," he might have served as a type of the kind of poet America would have produced by the biggest-river-and-tallest-mountain recipe, — longitude and latitude in plenty, with marks of culture scattered here and there like the *carets* on a proof-sheet.

It is now time to say something of Dryden as a dramatist. In the thirty-two years between 1662 and 1694 he produced twenty-five plays, and assisted Lee in two. I have hinted that it took Dryden longer than most men to find the true bent of his genius. On a superficial view, he might almost seem to confirm that theory, maintained by Johnson, among others, that genius was nothing more than great intellectual power exercised persistently in some particular direction which chance decided, so that it lay in circumstance merely whether a man should turn out a Shakespeare or a Newton. But when we come to compare what he wrote, regardless of Minerva's averted face, with the spontaneous production of his happier muse, we shall be inclined to think his example one of the strongest cases against the theory in question. He began his

dramatic career, as usual, by rowing against the strong current of his nature, and pulled only the more doggedly the more he felt himself swept down the stream. His first attempt was at comedy, and, though his earliest piece of that kind (the "Wild Gallant," 1663) utterly failed, he wrote eight others afterwards. On the 23d February, 1663, Pepys writes in his diary: "To Court, and there saw the 'Wild Gallant' performed by the king's house; but it was ill acted, and the play so poor a thing as I never saw in my life almost, and so little answering the name, that, from the beginning to the end, I could not, nor can at this time, tell certainly which was the Wild Gallant. The king did not seem pleased at all the whole play, nor anybody else." After some alteration, it was revived with more success. On its publication in 1669 Dryden honestly admitted its former failure, though with a kind of salvo for his self-love. "I made the town my judges, and the greater part condemned it. After which I do not think it my concernment to defend it with the ordinary zeal of a poet for his decried poem, though Corneille is more resolute in his preface before 'Pertharite,'[1] which was condemned more universally than this. . . . Yet it was received at Court, and was more than once

[1] Corneille's tragedy of *Pertharite* was acted unsuccessfully in 1659. Racine made free use of it in his more fortunate *Andromaque*.

the divertisement of his Majesty, by his own command." Pepys lets us amusingly behind the scenes in the matter of his Majesty's divertisement. Dryden does not seem to see that in the condemnation of something meant to amuse the public there can be no question of degree. To fail at all is to fail utterly.

"Tous les genres sont permis, hors le genre ennuyeux."

In the reading, at least, all Dryden's comic writing for the stage must be ranked with the latter class. He himself would fain make an exception of the "Spanish Friar," but I confess that I rather wonder at than envy those who can be amused by it. His comedies lack everything that a comedy should have, — lightness, quickness of transition, unexpectedness of incident, easy cleverness of dialogue, and humorous contrast of character brought out by identity of situation. The comic parts of the "Maiden Queen" seem to me Dryden's best, but the merit even of these is Shakespeare's, and there is little choice where even the best is only tolerable. The common quality, however, of all Dryden's comedies is their nastiness, the more remarkable because we have ample evidence that he was a man of modest conversation. Pepys, who was by no means squeamish (for he found "Sir Martin Marall" "the most entire piece of mirth . . . that certainly ever was writ . . . very good wit therein, not fooling"),

writes in his diary of the 19th June, 1668: "My wife and Deb to the king's playhouse to-day, thinking to spy me there, and saw the new play 'Evening Love,' of Dryden's, which, though the world commends, she likes not." The next day he saw it himself, "and do not like it, it being very smutty, and nothing so good as the 'Maiden Queen' or the 'Indian Emperor' of Dryden's making. *I was troubled at it.*" On the 22d he adds: "Calling this day at Herringman's,[1] he tells me Dryden do himself call it but a fifth-rate play." This was no doubt true, and yet, though Dryden in his preface to the play says, "I confess I have given [yielded] too much to the people in it, and am ashamed for them as well as for myself, that I have pleased them at so cheap a rate," he takes care to add, "not that there is anything here that I would not defend to an ill-natured judge." The plot was from Calderon, and the author, rebutting the charge of plagiarism, tells us that the king ("without whose command they should no longer be troubled with anything of mine") had already answered for him by saying, "that he only desired that they who accused me of theft would always steal him plays like mine."[2]

[1] Dryden's publisher.

[2] It is curious how good things repeat themselves. When General Grant was accused of drinking too much, Mr. Lincoln drily replied that "he wished all our generals might get hold of the same whiskey."

Of the morals of the play he has not a word, nor do I believe that he was conscious of any harm in them till he was attacked by Collier, and then (with some protest against what he considers the undue severity of his censor) he had the manliness to confess that he had done wrong. "It becomes me not to draw my pen in the defence of a bad cause, when I have so often drawn it for a good one."[1] And in a letter to his correspondent, Mrs. Thomas, written only a few weeks before his death, warning her against the example of Mrs. Behn, he says, with remorseful sincerity: "I confess I am the last man in the world who ought in justice to arraign her, who have been myself too much a libertine in most of my poems, which I should be well contented I had time either to purge or to see them fairly burned." Congreve was less patient, and even Dryden, in the last epilogue he ever wrote, attempts an excuse: —

"Perhaps the Parson stretched a point too far,
When with our Theatres he waged a war;
He tells you that this very moral age
Received the first infection from the Stage,
But sure a banished Court, with lewdness fraught,
The seeds of open vice returning brought.
. . . . . .
Whitehall the naked Venus first revealed,
Who, standing, as at Cyprus, in her shrine,
The strumpet was adored with rites divine.
. . . . . .

[1] Preface to the *Fables*.

> The poets, who must live by Courts or starve,
> Were proud so good a Government to serve,
> And, mixing with buffoons and pimps profane,
> Tainted the Stage for some small snip of gain."

Dryden least of all men should have stooped to this palliation, for he had, not without justice, said of himself: "The same parts and application which have made me a poet might have raised me to any honors of the gown." Milton and Marvell neither lived by the Court, nor starved. Charles Lamb most ingeniously defends the Comedy of the Restoration as "the sanctuary and quiet Alsatia of hunted casuistry," where there was no pretence of representing a real world.[1] But this was certainly not so. Dryden again and again boasts of the superior advantage which his age had over that of the elder dramatists, in painting polite life, and attributes it to a greater freedom of intercourse between the poets and the frequenters of the Court.[2] We shall be less surprised at the *kind* of refinement upon which Dryden congratulated himself, when we learn (from the dedication of "Marriage à la Mode") that the Earl of Rochester was its exemplar: "The best comic

[1] I interpret some otherwise ambiguous passages in this charming and acute essay by its title: "On the *artificial* comedy of the last century."

[2] See especially his defence of the epilogue to the Second Part of the *Conquest of Granada* (1672).

writers of our age will join with me to acknowledge that they have copied the gallantries of Courts, the delicacy of expression, and the decencies of behavior from your Lordship." In judging Dryden, it should be borne in mind that for some years he was under contract to deliver three plays a year, a kind of bond to which no man should subject his brain who has a decent respect for the quality of its products. We should remember, too, that in his day *manners* meant what we call *morals*, that custom always makes a larger part of virtue among average men than they are quite aware, and that the reaction from an outward conformity which had no root in inward faith may for a time have given to the frank expression of laxity an air of honesty that made it seem almost refreshing. There is no such hotbed for excess of license as excess of restraint, and the arrogant fanaticism of a single virtue is apt to make men suspicious of tyranny in all the rest. But the riot of emancipation could not last long, for the more tolerant society is of private vice, the more exacting will it be of public decorum, that excellent thing, so often the plausible substitute for things more excellent. By 1678 the public mind had so far recovered its tone that Dryden's comedy of "Limberham" was barely tolerated for three nights. I will let the man who looked at human nature from more sides,

and therefore judged it more gently than any other, give the only excuse possible for Dryden: —

> "Men's judgments are
> A parcel of their fortunes, and things outward
> Do draw the inward quality after them
> To suffer all alike."

Dryden's own apology only makes matters worse for him by showing that he committed his offences with his eyes wide open, and that he wrote comedies so wholly in despite of nature as never to deviate into the comic. Failing as clown, he did not scruple to take on himself the office of Chiffinch to the palled appetite of the public. "For I confess my chief endeavours are to delight the age in which I live. If the humour of this be for low comedy, small accidents, and raillery, I will force my genius to obey it, though with more reputation I could write in verse. I know I am not so fitted by nature to write comedy; I want that gayety of humour which is requisite to it. My conversation is slow and dull, my humour saturnine and reserved: In short, I am none of those who endeavour to break jests in company or make repartees. So that those who decry my comedies do me no injury, except it be in point of profit: Reputation in them is the last thing to which I shall pretend."[1] For my own part, though I have

[1] *Defence of an Essay on Dramatick Poesy.*

been forced to hold my nose in picking my way through these ordures of Dryden, I am free to say that I think them far less morally mischievous than that *corps-de-ballet* literature in which the most animal of the passions is made more temptingly naked by a veil of French gauze. Nor does Dryden's lewdness leave such a reek in the mind as the filthy cynicism of Swift, who delighted to uncover the nakedness of our common mother.

It is pleasant to follow Dryden into the more congenial region of heroic plays, though here also we find him making a false start. Anxious to please the king,[1] and so able a reasoner as to convince even himself of the justice of whatever cause he argued, he not only wrote tragedies in the French style, but defended his practice in an essay which is by far the most delightful reproduction of the classic dialogue ever written in English. Eugenius (Lord Buckhurst), Lisideius (Sir Charles Sidley), Crites (Sir R. Howard), and Neander (Dryden) are the four partakers in the debate. The comparative merits of ancients and moderns, of the Shakespearian and contemporary drama, of rhyme and blank verse, the value of the three (supposed) Aristo-

[1] "The favor which heroick plays have lately found upon our theatres has been wholly derived to them from the countenance and approbation they have received at Court." (Dedication of *Indian Emperor* to Duchess of Monmouth.)

telian unities, are the main topics discussed. The tone of the discussion is admirable, midway between bookishness and talk, and the fairness with which each side of the argument is treated shows the breadth of Dryden's mind perhaps better than any other one piece of his writing. There are no men of straw set up to be knocked down again, as there commonly are in debates conducted upon this plan. The "Defence" of the Essay is to be taken as a supplement to Neander's share in it, as well as many scattered passages in subsequent prefaces and dedications. All the interlocutors agree that "the sweetness of English verse was never understood or practised by our fathers," and that "our poesy is much improved by the happiness of some writers yet living, who first taught us to mould our thoughts into easy and significant words, to retrench the superfluities of expression, and to make our rhyme so properly a part of the verse that it should never mislead the sense, but itself be led and governed by it." In another place he shows that by "living writers" he meant Waller and Denham. "Rhyme has all the advantages of prose besides its own. But the excellence and dignity of it were never fully known till Mr. Waller taught it: he first made writing easily an art; first showed us to conclude the sense, most commonly in distiches, which in the verse before him runs on for so many lines

together that the reader is out of breath to overtake it."[1] Dryden afterwards changed his mind, and one of the excellences of his own rhymed verse is, that his sense is too ample to be concluded by the distich. Rhyme had been censured as unnatural in dialogue; but Dryden replies that it is no more so than blank verse, since no man talks any kind of verse in real life. But the argument for rhyme is of another kind. "I am satisfied if it cause delight, for delight is the chief if not the only end of poesy [he should have said *means*]; instruction can be admitted but in the second place, for poesy only instructs as it delights. . . . The converse, therefore, which a poet is to imitate must be heightened with all the arts and ornaments of poesy, and must be such as, strictly considered, could never be supposed spoken by any without premeditation. . . . Thus prose, though the rightful prince, yet is by common consent deposed as too weak for the government of serious plays, and, he failing, there now start up two competitors; one the nearer in blood, which is blank verse; the other more fit for the ends of government, which is rhyme. Blank verse is, indeed, the nearer prose, but he is blemished with the weakness of his predecessor. Rhyme (for I will deal clearly) has somewhat of the usurper in him; but he is brave and generous and his

[1] Dedication of *Rival Ladies*.

dominion pleasing." [1] To the objection that the difficulties of rhyme will lead to circumlocution, he answers in substance, that a good poet will know how to avoid them.

It is curious how long the superstition that Waller was the refiner of English verse has prevailed since Dryden first gave it vogue. He was a very poor poet and a purely mechanical versifier. He has lived mainly on the credit of his "Rose," of his "Girdle" (soiled with a vile pun), and of a single couplet, —

"The soul's dark cottage, battered and decayed,
Lets in new light through chinks that Time hath made," —

in which the melody alone belongs to him, and the conceit, such as it is, to Samuel Daniel, who said, long before, that the body's

"Walls, grown thin, permit the mind
To look out thorough and his frailty find."

Waller has made worse nonsense of it in the transfusion. It might seem that Ben Jonson had a prophetic foreboding of him when he wrote: "Others there are that have no composition at all, but a kind of tuning and rhyming fall, in what they write. It runs and slides and only makes a sound. Women's poets they are called, as you have women's tailors.

[1] *Defence of the Essay*. Dryden, in the happiness of his illustrative comparisons, is almost unmatched. Like himself, they occupy a middle ground between poetry and prose, — they are a cross between metaphor and simile.

> "They write a verse as smooth, as soft, as cream
> In which there is no torrent, nor scarce stream.

You may sound these wits and find the depth of them with your middle-finger."[1] It seems to have been taken for granted by Waller, as afterwards by Dryden, that our elder poets bestowed no thought upon their verse. "Waller was smooth," but unhappily he was also flat, and his importation of the French theory of the couplet as a kind of thought-coop did nothing but mischief.[2] He never compassed even a smoothness approaching this description of a nightingale's song by a third-rate poet of the earlier school, —

> "Trails her plain ditty in one long-spun note
> Through the sleek passage of her open throat,
> A clear, unwrinkled song," —

one of whose beauties is its running over into the third verse. Those poets indeed

> "Felt music's pulse in all her arteries"; —

[1] *Discoveries.*

[2] What a wretched rhymer he could be we may see in his *alteration* of the *Maid's Tragedy* of Beaumont and Fletcher: —

> "Not long since walking in the field,
> My nurse and I, we there beheld
> A goodly fruit; which, tempting me,
> I would have plucked; but, trembling, she,
> Whoever eat those berries, cried,
> In less than half an hour died!"

What intolerable seesaw! Not much of Byron's "fatal facility" in *these* octosyllabics!

and Dryden himself found out, when he came to try it, that blank verse was not so easy a thing as he at first conceived it, nay, that it is the most difficult of all verse, and that it must make up in harmony, by variety of pause and modulation, for what it loses in the melody of rhyme. In what makes the chief merit of his later versification, he but rediscovered the secret of his predecessors in giving to rhymed pentameters something of the freedom of blank verse, and not mistaking metre for rhythm.

Voltaire, in his Commentary on Corneille, has sufficiently lamented the awkwardness of movement imposed upon the French dramatists by the gyves of rhyme. But he considers the necessity of overcoming this obstacle, on the whole, an advantage. Difficulty is his tenth and superior muse. How did Dryden, who says nearly the same thing, succeed in his attempt at the French manner? He fell into every one of its vices, without attaining much of what constitutes its excellence. From the nature of the language, all French poetry is purely artificial, and its high polish is all that keeps out decay. The length of their dramatic verse forces the French into much tautology, into bombast in its original meaning, the stuffing out a thought with words till it fills the line. The rigid system of their rhyme, which makes it much harder to manage than in English, has accustomed them

to inaccuracies of thought which would shock them in prose. For example, in the "Cinna" of Corneille, as originally written, Emilie says to Augustus, —

> "Ces flammes dans nos cœurs dès longtemps étoient nées,
> Et ce sont des secrets de plus de quatre années."

I say nothing of the second verse, which is purely prosaic surplusage exacted by the rhyme, nor of the jingling together of *ces*, *dès*, *étoient*, *nées*, *des*, and *secrets*, but I confess that *nées* does not seem to be the epithet that Corneille would have chosen for *flammes*, if he could have had his own way, and that flames would seem of all things the hardest to keep secret. But in revising, Corneille changed the first verse thus, —

> "Ces flammes dans nos cœurs *sans votre ordre* étoient nées."

Can anything be more absurd than flames born to order? Yet Voltaire, on his guard against these rhyming pitfalls for the sense, does not notice this in his minute comments on this play. Of extravagant metaphor, the result of this same making sound the file-leader of sense, a single example from "Heraclius" shall suffice: —

> "La vapeur de mon sang ira grossir la foudre
> Que Dieu tient déjà prête à le reduire en poudre."

One cannot think of a Louis Quatorze Apollo except in a full-bottomed periwig, and the tragic style of their poets is always showing the disas-

trous influence of that portentous comet. It is the *style perruque* in another than the French meaning of the phrase, and the skill lay in dressing it majestically, so that, as Cibber says, "upon the head of a man of sense, *if it became him*, it could never fail of drawing to him a more partial regard and benevolence than could possibly be hoped for in an ill-made one." It did not become Dryden, and he left it off.[1]

Like his own Zimri, Dryden was "all for" this or that fancy, till he took up with another. But even while he was writing on French models, his judgment could not be blinded to their defects. "Look upon the 'Cinna' and the 'Pompey,' they are not so properly to be called plays as long discourses of reason of State, and 'Polieucte' in matters of religion is as solemn as the long stops upon our organs; . . . their actors speak by the hour-glass like our parsons. . . . I deny not but this may suit well enough with the French, for as we, who are a more sullen people, come to be diverted at our plays, so they, who are of an airy and gay temper, come thither to make themselves more serious."[2] With what an air of innocent unconsciousness the sarcasm is driven home! Again, while he was still slaving at these bricks without straw,

[1] In more senses than one. His last and best portrait shows him in his own gray hair.

[2] *Essay on Dramatick Poesy.*

he says: "The present French poets are generally accused that, wheresoever they lay the scene, or in whatever age, the manners of their heroes are wholly French. Racine's Bajazet is bred at Constantinople, but his civilities are conveyed to him by some secret passage from Versailles into the Seraglio." It is curious that Voltaire, speaking of the "Bérénice" of Racine, praises a passage in it for precisely what Dryden condemns: "Il semble qu'on entende Henriette d'Angleterre elle-même parlant au marquis de Vardes. La politesse de la cour de Louis XIV., l'agrément de la langue Française, la douceur de la versification la plus naturelle, le sentiment le plus tendre, tout se trouve dans ce peu de vers." After Dryden had broken away from the heroic style, he speaks out more plainly. In the Preface to his "All for Love," in reply to some cavils upon "little, and not essential decencies," the decision about which he refers to a master of ceremonies, he goes on to say: "The French poets, I confess, are strict observers of these punctilios; . . . in this nicety of manners does the excellency of French poetry consist. Their heroes are the most civil people breathing, but their good breeding seldom extends to a word of sense. All their wit is in their ceremony; they want the genius which animates our stage, and therefore 't is but necessary, when they cannot please, that they should

take care not to offend. . . . They are so careful not to exasperate a critic that they never leave him any work, . . . for no part of a poem is worth our discommending where the whole is insipid, as when we have once tasted palled wine we stay not to examine it glass by glass. But while they affect to shine in trifles, they are often careless in essentials. . . . For my part, I desire to be tried by the laws of my own country." This is said in heat, but it is plain enough that his mind was wholly changed. In his discourse on epic poetry he is as decided, but more temperate. He says that the French heroic verse "runs with more activity than strength.[1] Their language is not strung with sinews like our English; it has the nimbleness of a greyhound, but not the bulk and body of a mastiff. Our men and our verses overbear them by their weight, and *pondere, non numero*, is the British motto. The French have set up purity for the standard of their language, and a masculine vigor is that of ours. Like their tongue is the genius

[1] A French hendecasyllable verse runs exactly like our ballad measure: —

> A cobbler there was and he lived in a stall, . . .
> *La raison, pour marcher, n'a souvent qu'une voye.*
> (Dryden's note.)

The verse is not a hendecasyllable. "Attended watchfully to her recitative (Mlle. Duchesnois), and find that, in nine lines out of ten, 'A cobbler there was,' etc., *is* the tune of the French heroics." (*Moore's Diary*, 24th April, 1821.)

of their poets,—light and trifling in comparison of the English." [1]

Dryden might have profited by an admirable saying of his own, that "they who would combat general authority with particular opinion must first establish themselves a reputation of understanding better than other men." He understood the defects much better than the beauties of the French theatre. Lessing was even more one-sided in his judgment upon it.[2] Goethe, with his usual wisdom, studied it carefully without losing his temper, and tried to profit by its structural merits. Dryden, with his eyes wide open, copied its worst faults, especially its declamatory sentiment. He should have known that certain things can never be transplanted, and that among these is a style of poetry whose great excellence was that it was in

[1] "The language of the age is never the language of poetry, except among the French, whose verse, where the thought or image does not support it, differs in nothing from prose." (Gray to West.)

[2] Diderot and Rousseau, however, thought their language unfit for poetry, and Voltaire seems to have half agreed with them. No one has expressed this feeling more neatly than Fauriel: "Nul doute que l'on ne puisse dire en prose des choses éminemment poétiques, tout comme il n'est que trop certain que l'on peut en dire de fort prosaïques en vers, et même en excellents vers, en vers élégamment tournés, et en beau langage. C'est un fait dont je n'ai pas besoin d'indiquer d'exemples: aucune littérature n'en fournirait autant que le nôtre." (*Histoire de la Poésie Provençale*, ii. 237.)

perfect sympathy with the genius of the people among whom it came into being. But the truth is, that Dryden had no aptitude whatever for the stage, and in writing for it he was attempting to make a trade of his genius, — an arrangement from which the genius always withdraws in disgust. It was easier to make loose thinking and the bad writing which betrays it pass unobserved while the ear was occupied with the sonorous music of the rhyme to which they marched. Except in "All for Love," "the only play," he tells us, "which he wrote to please himself,"[1] there is no trace of real passion in any of his tragedies. This, indeed, is inevitable, for there are no characters, but only personages, in any except that. That is, in many respects, a noble play, and there are few finer scenes, whether in the conception or the carrying out, than that between Antony and Ventidius in the first act.[2]

As usual, Dryden's good sense was not blind to the extravagances of his dramatic style. In "Mac Flecknoe" he makes his own Maximin the type of childish rant, —

> "And little Maximins the gods defy";—

[1] *Parallel of Poetry and Painting.*

[2] "Il y a seulement la scène de Ventidius et d'Antoine qui est digne de Corneille. C'est là le sentiment de milord Bolingbroke et de tous les bons auteurs; c'est ainsi que pensait Addisson." (Voltaire to M. de Fromont, 15th November, 1735.)

but, as usual also, he could give a plausible reason for his own mistakes by means of that most fallacious of all fallacies which is true so far as it goes. In his Prologue to the "Royal Martyr" he says: —

> "And he who servilely creeps after sense
> Is safe, but ne'er will reach an excellence.
> . . . . . .
> But, when a tyrant for his theme he had,
> He loosed the reins and let his muse run mad,
> And, though he stumbles in a full career,
> Yet rashness is a better fault than fear;
> . . . . . .
> They then, who of each trip advantage take,
> Find out those faults which they want wit to make."

And in the Preface to the same play he tells us: "I have not everywhere observed the quality of numbers in my verse, partly by reason of my haste, but more especially because I *would not have my sense a slave to syllables*." Dryden, when he had not a bad case to argue, would have had small respect for the wit whose skill lay in the making of faults, and has himself, where his self-love was not engaged, admirably defined the boundary which divides boldness from rashness. What Quintilian says of Seneca applies very aptly to Dryden: "Velles eum suo ingenio dixisse, alieno judicio."[1] He was thinking of himself, I fancy, when he makes Ventidius say of Antony, —

[1] *Inst.* x., i. 129.

"He starts out wide
And bounds into a vice that bears him far
From his first course, and plunges him in ills;
But, when his danger makes him find his fault,
Quick to observe, and full of sharp remorse,
He censures eagerly his own misdeeds,
Judging himself with malice to himself,
And not forgiving what as man he did
Because his other parts are more than man."

But bad though they nearly all are as wholes, his plays contain passages which only the great masters have surpassed, and to the level of which no subsequent writer for the stage has ever risen. The necessity of rhyme often forced him to a platitude, as where he says, —

"My love was blind to your deluding art,
But blind men feel when stabbed so near the heart." [1]

But even in rhyme he not seldom justifies his claim to the title of "glorious John." In the very play from which I have just quoted are these verses in his best manner: —

"No, like his better Fortune I 'll appear,
With open arms, loose veil, and flowing hair,
Just flying forward from her rolling sphere."

His comparisons, as I have said, are almost always happy. This, from the "Indian Emperor," is tenderly pathetic: —

"As callow birds,
Whose mother 's killed in seeking of the prey,
Cry in their nest and think her long away,

[1] *Conquest of Granada*, Second Part.

And, at each leaf that stirs, each blast of wind,
Gape for the food which they must never find."

And this, of the anger with which the Maiden Queen, striving to hide her jealousy, betrays her love, is vigorous: —

"Her rage was love, and its tempestuous flame,
Like lightning, showed the heaven from whence it came."

The following simile from the "Conquest of Granada" is as well expressed as it is apt in conception: —

"I scarcely understand my own intent;
But, silk-worm like, so long within have wrought,
That I am lost in my own web of thought."

In the "Rival Ladies," Angelina, walking in the dark, describes her sensations naturally and strikingly: —

"No noise but what my footsteps make, and they
Sound dreadfully and louder than by day:
They double too, and every step I take
Sounds thick, methinks, and more than one could make."

In all the rhymed plays[1] there are many passages which one is rather inclined to like than sure he would be right in liking them. The following verses from "Aurengzebe" are of this sort: —

"My love was such it needed no return,
Rich in itself, like elemental fire,
Whose pureness does no aliment require."

[1] In most, he mingles blank verse.

This is Cowleyish, and *pureness* is surely the wrong word; and yet it is better than mere commonplace. Perhaps what oftenest turns the balance in Dryden's favor, when we are weighing his claims as a poet, is his persistent capability of enthusiasm. To the last he kindles, and sometimes *almost* flashes out that supernatural light which is the supreme test of poetic genius. As he himself so finely and characteristically says in "Aurengzebe," there was no period in his life when it was not true of him that

> "He felt the inspiring heat, the absent god return."

The verses which follow are full of him, and, with the exception of the single word *underwent*, are in his luckiest manner: —

> "One loose, one sally of a heroe's soul,
> Does all the military art control.
> While timorous wit goes round, or fords the shore,
> He shoots the gulf, and is already o'er,
> And, when the enthusiastic fit is spent,
> Looks back amazed at what he underwent." [1]

Pithy sentences and phrases always drop from Dryden's pen as if unawares, whether in prose or verse. I string together a few at random: —

> "The greatest argument for love is love."
>
> "Few know the use of life before 't is past."
>
> "Time gives himself and is not valued."

[1] *Conquest of Granada.*

"Death in itself is nothing; but we fear
To be we know not what, we know not where."

"Love either finds equality or makes it;
Like death, he knows no difference in degrees."

"That 's empire, that which I can give away."

"Yours is a soul irregularly great,
Which, wanting temper, yet abounds in heat."

"Forgiveness to the injured does belong,
But they ne'er pardon who have done the wrong."

"Poor women's thoughts are all extempore."

"The cause of love can never be assigned,
'T is in no face, but in the lover's mind." [1]

"Heaven can forgive a crime to penitence,
For Heaven can judge if penitence be true;
But man, who knows not hearts, should make examples."

"Kings' titles commonly begin by force,
Which time wears off and mellows into right."

"Fear 's a large promiser; who subject live
To that base passion, know not what they give."

"The secret pleasure of the generous act
Is the great mind's great bribe."

"That bad thing, gold, buys all good things."

"Why, love does all that 's noble here below."

"To prove religion true,
If either wit or sufferings could suffice,
All faiths afford the constant and the wise."

[1] This recalls a striking verse of Alfred de Musset: —

"La muse est toujours belle,
Même pour l'insensé, même pour l'impuissant,
Car sa beauté pour nous, c'est notre amour pour elle."

But Dryden, as he tells us himself, —

> "Grew weary of his long-loved mistress, Rhyme;
> Passion 's too fierce to be in fetters bound,
> And Nature flies him like enchanted ground."

The finest things in his plays were written in blank verse, as vernacular to him as the alexandrine to the French. In this he vindicates his claim as a poet. His diction gets wings, and both his verse and his thought become capable of a reach which was denied them when set in the stocks of the couplet. The solid man becomes even airy in this new-found freedom: Antony says, —

> "How I loved,
> Witness ye days and nights, and all ye hours
> That *danced away with down upon your feet.*"

And what image was ever more delicately exquisite, what movement more fadingly accordant with the sense, than in the last two verses of the following passage?

> "I feel death rising higher still and higher,
> Within my bosom; every breath I fetch
> Shuts up my life within a shorter compass,
> *And, like the vanishing sound of bells, grows less*
> *And less each pulse, till it be lost in air.*" [1]

Nor was he altogether without pathos, though it is rare with him. The following passage seems to me tenderly full of it: —

[1] *Rival Ladies.*

"Something like
That voice methinks, I should have somewhere heard;
But floods of woe have hurried it far off
Beyond my ken of soul." [1]

And this single verse from "Aurengzebe": —

"Live still! oh live! live even to be unkind!"

with its passionate eagerness and sobbing repetition, is worth a ship-load of the long-drawn treacle of modern self-compassion.

Now and then, to be sure, we come upon something that makes us hesitate again whether, after all, Dryden was not grandiose rather than great, as in the two passages that next follow: —

"He looks secure of death, superior greatness,
Like Jove when he made Fate and said, Thou art
The slave of my creation." [2]

"I 'm pleased with my own work; Jove was not more
With infant nature, when his spacious hand
Had rounded this huge ball of earth and seas,
To give it the first push and see it roll
Along the vast abyss." [3]

I should say that Dryden is more apt to dilate our fancy than our thought, as great poets have the gift of doing. But if he have not the potent alchemy that transmutes the lead of our commonplace associations into gold, as Shakespeare knows how to do so easily, yet his sense is always up to the sterling standard; and though

[1] *Don Sebastian.* [2] Ibid. [3] *Cleomenes.*

he has not added so much as some have done to the stock of bullion which others afterwards coin and put in circulation, there are few who have minted so many phrases that are still a part of our daily currency. The first line of the following passage has been worn pretty smooth, but the succeeding ones are less familiar: —

> "Men are but children of a larger growth,
> Our appetites as apt to change as theirs,
> And full as craving too and full as vain;
> And yet the soul, shut up in her dark room,
> Viewing so clear abroad, at home sees nothing;
> But, like a mole in earth, busy and blind,
> Works all her folly up and casts it outward
> In the world's open view." [1]

The image is mixed and even contradictory, but the thought obtains grace for it. I feel as if Shakespeare would have written *seeing* for *viewing*, thus gaining the strength of repetition in one verse and avoiding the sameness of it in the other. Dryden, I suspect, was not much given to correction, and indeed one of the great charms of his best writing is that everything seems struck off at a heat, as by a superior man in the best mood of his talk. Where he rises, he generally becomes fervent rather than imaginative; his thought does not incorporate itself in metaphor, as in purely poetic minds, but repeats and reinforces itself in simile. Where he *is* imaginative,

[1] *All for Love.*

it is in that lower sense which the poverty of our language, for want of a better word, compels us to call *picturesque*, and even then he shows little of that finer instinct which suggests so much more than it tells, and works the more powerfully as it taxes more the imagination of the reader. In Donne's "Relic" there is an example of what I mean. He fancies some one breaking up his grave and spying

> "A bracelet of bright hair about the bone," —

a verse that still shines there in the darkness of the tomb, after two centuries, like one of those inextinguishable lamps whose secret is lost.[1] Yet Dryden sometimes showed a sense of this magic of a mysterious hint, as in the "Spanish Friar":—

> "No, I confess, you bade me not in words;
> The dial spoke not, but it made shrewd signs,
> And pointed full upon the stroke of murder."

This is perhaps a solitary example. Nor is he always so possessed by the image in his mind as unconsciously to choose even the pictur-

[1] Dryden, with his wonted perspicacity, follows Ben Jonson in calling Donne "the greatest wit, though not the best poet, of our nation." (Dedication of *Eleonora*.) Even as a poet Donne

> "Had in him those brave translunary things
> That our first poets had."

To open vistas for the imagination through the blind wall of the senses, as he could sometimes do, is the supreme function of poetry.

esquely imaginative word. He has done so, however, in this passage from "Marriage à la Mode": —

> "You ne'er must hope again to see your princess,
> Except as prisoners view fair walks and streets,
> And careless passengers going by their grates."

But after all, he is best upon a level, table-land, it is true, and a very high level, but still somewhere between the loftier peaks of inspiration and the plain of every-day life. In those passages where he moralizes he is always good, setting some obvious truth in a new light by vigorous phrase and happy illustration. Take this (from "Œdipus") as a proof of it: —

> "The gods are just,
> But how can finite measure infinite?
> Reason! alas, it does not know itself!
> Yet man, vain man, would with his short-lined plummet
> Fathom the vast abyss of heavenly justice.
> Whatever is, is in its causes just,
> Since all things are by fate. But purblind man
> Sees but a part o' th' chain, the nearest links,
> His eyes not carrying to that equal beam
> That poises all above."

From the same play I pick an illustration of that ripened sweetness of thought and language which marks the natural vein of Dryden. One cannot help applying the passage to the late Mr. Quincy: —

" Of no distemper, of no blast he died,
But fell like autumn fruit that mellowed long,
E'en wondered at because he dropt no sooner;
Fate seemed to wind him up for fourscore years;
Yet freshly ran he on ten winters more,
Till, like a clock worn out with eating Time,
The wheels of weary life at last stood still." [1]

Here is another of the same kind from " All for Love " : —

" Gone so soon!
Is Death no more? He used him carelessly,
With a familiar kindness; ere he knocked,
Ran to the door and took him in his arms,
As who should say, You 're welcome at all hours,
A friend need give no warning."

With one more extract from the same play, which is in every way his best, for he had, when he wrote it, been feeding on the bee-bread of Shakespeare, I shall conclude. Antony says, —

" For I am now so sunk from what I was,
Thou find'st me at my lowest water-mark.
The rivers that ran in and raised my fortunes
Are all dried up, or take another course:
What I have left is from my native spring;
I 've a heart still that swells in scorn of Fate,
And lifts me to my banks."

This is certainly, from beginning to end, in what used to be called the *grand* style, at once noble and natural. I have not undertaken to analyze any one of the plays, for (except in " All for

[1] My own judgment is my sole warrant for attributing these extracts from *Œdipus* to Dryden rather than Lee.

Love ") it would have been only to expose their weakness. Dryden had *no* constructive faculty; and in every one of his longer poems that required a plot, the plot is bad, always more or less inconsistent with itself, and rather hitched-on to the subject than combining with it. It is fair to say, however, before leaving this part of Dryden's literary work, that Horne Tooke thought "Don Sebastian" "the best play extant." [1] Gray admired the plays of Dryden, "not as dramatic compositions, but as poetry." [2] "There are as many things finely said in his plays as almost by anybody," said Pope to Spence. Of their rant, their fustian, their bombast, their bad English, of their innumerable sins against Dryden's own better conscience both as poet and critic, I shall excuse myself from giving any instances.[3] I like what is good in Dryden so

[1] *Recollections of Rogers*, p. 165.

[2] Nicholls's *Reminiscences of Gray*. Pickering's edition of Gray's Works, vol. v. p. 35.

[3] Let one suffice for all. In the *Royal Martyr*, Porphyrius, waiting his execution, says to Maximin, who had wished him for a son-in-law: —

> "Where'er thou stand'st, I 'll level at that place
> My gushing blood, and spout it at thy face;
> Thus not by marriage we our blood will join;
> Nay, more, my arms shall throw my head at thine."

"It is no shame," says Dryden himself, "to be a poet, though it is to be a bad one." Cibber seems to say that the audience could not help laughing at Dryden's Rhodomontades as he calls them.

much, and it *is* so good, that I think Gray was justified in always losing his temper when he heard "his faults criticised."[1]

It is as a satirist and pleader in verse that Dryden is best known, and as both he is in some respects unrivalled. His satire is not so sly as Chaucer's, but it is distinguished by the same good nature. There is no malice in it. I shall not enter into his literary quarrels further than to say that he seems to me, on the whole, to have been forbearing, which is the more striking as he tells us repeatedly that he was naturally vindictive. It was he who called revenge "the darling attribute of heaven." "I complain not of their lampoons and libels, though I have been the public mark for many years. I am vindictive enough to have repelled force by force, if I could imagine that any of them had ever reached me." It was this feeling of easy superiority, I suspect, that made him the mark for so much jealous vituperation. Scott is wrong in attributing his onslaught upon Settle to jealousy because one of the latter's plays had been performed at Court, — an honor never paid to any of Dryden's.[2]

[1] Gray, *ubi supra*, p. 38.

[2] Scott had never seen Pepys's *Diary* when he wrote this, or he would have left it unwritten: "Fell to discourse of the last night's work at Court, where the ladies and Duke of Monmouth acted the *Indian Emperor* wherein they told me these things most remarkable that not any woman but the Duchess of Monmouth and Mrs. Cornwallis did anything but

I have found nothing like a trace of jealousy in that large and benignant nature. In his vindication of the "Duke of Guise," he says, with honest confidence in himself: "Nay, I durst almost refer myself to some of the angry poets on the other side, whether I have not rather countenanced and assisted their beginnings than hindered them from rising." He seems to have been really as indifferent to the attacks on himself as Pope pretended to be. In the same vindication he says of the "Rehearsal," the only one of them that had any wit in it, and it has a great deal: "Much less am I concerned at the noble name of Bayes; that's a brat so like his own father that he cannot be mistaken for any other body. They might as reasonably have called Tom Sternhold Virgil, and the resemblance would have held as well." In his "Essay on Satire" he says: "And yet we know that in Christian charity all offences are to be forgiven as we expect the like pardon for those we daily commit against Almighty God. And this consideration has often made me tremble when I was saying our Lord's Prayer; for the plain condition of the forgiveness which we beg is the pardoning of others the offences which they have

like fools and stocks, but that these two did do most extraordinary well; that not any man did anything well but Captain O'Bryan, who spoke and did well, but above all things did dance most incomparably." (14th January, 1668.)

done to us ; for which reason I have many times avoided the commission of that fault, even when I have been notoriously provoked." [1] And in another passage he says, with his usual wisdom: "Good sense and good nature are never separated, though the ignorant world has thought otherwise. Good nature, by which I mean beneficence and candor, is the product of right reason, which of necessity will give allowance to the failings of others, by considering that there is nothing perfect in mankind." In the same Essay he gives his own receipt for satire: "How easy it is to call rogue and villain, and that wittily! but how hard to make a man appear a fool, a blockhead, or a knave, without using any of those opprobrious terms! . . . This is the mystery of that noble trade. . . . Neither is it true that this fineness of raillery is offensive: a witty man is tickled while he is hurt in this manner, and a fool feels it not. . . . There is a vast difference between the slovenly butchering of a man and the fineness of a stroke that separates the head from the body, and leaves it standing in its place. A man may be capable, as Jack Ketch's wife said of his servant, of a plain piece of work, of a bare hanging; but to make a malefactor die sweetly was only belonging to her

[1] See also that noble passage in *The Hind and the Panther* (1573–1591), where this is put into verse. Dryden always thought in prose.

husband. I wish I could apply it to myself, if the reader would be kind enough to think it belongs to me. The character of Zimri in my 'Absalom' is, in my opinion, worth the whole poem. It is not bloody, but it is ridiculous enough, and he for whom it was intended was too witty to resent it as an injury. . . . I avoided the mention of great crimes, and applied myself to the representing of blind sides and little extravagances, to which, the wittier a man is, he is generally the more obnoxious."

Dryden thought his genius led him that way. In his elegy on the satirist Oldham, whom Hallam, without reading him, I suspect, ranks next to Dryden,[1] he says: —

> "For sure our souls were near allied, and thine
> Cast in the same poetic mould with mine;
> One common note in either lyre did strike,
> And knaves and fools we both abhorred alike."

His practice is not always so delicate as his theory; but if he was sometimes rough, he never took a base advantage. He knocks his antagonist down, and there an end. Pope seems to have nursed his grudge, and then, watching his chance, to have squirted vitriol from behind a corner, rather glad than otherwise if it fell on

[1] Probably on the authority of this very epitaph, as if epitaphs were to be believed even under oath! A great many authors live because we read nothing but their tombstones. Oldham was, to borrow one of Dryden's phrases, "a bad or, which is worse, an indifferent poet."

the women of those he hated or envied. And if Dryden is never dastardly, as Pope often was, so also he never wrote anything so maliciously depreciatory as Pope's unprovoked attack on Addison. Dryden's satire is often coarse, but where it is coarsest, it is commonly in defence of himself against attacks that were themselves brutal. Then, to be sure, he snatches the first ready cudgel, as in Shadwell's case, though even then there is something of the good humor of conscious strength. Pope's provocation was too often the mere opportunity to say a biting thing, where he could do it safely. If his victim showed fight, he tried to smooth things over, as with Dennis and Hill. Dryden could forget that he had ever had a quarrel, but he never slunk away from any, least of all from one provoked by himself.[1] Pope's satire is too much occupied with the externals of manners, habits, personal defects, and peculiarities. Dryden goes right to the rooted character of the man, to the weaknesses of his nature, as where he says of Burnett: —

> "Prompt to assail, and careless of defence,
> Invulnerable in his impudence,
> He dares the world, and, eager of a name,
> He thrusts about and *justles into fame*.

[1] "He was of a nature exceedingly humane and compassionate, easily forgiving injuries, and capable of a prompt and sincere reconciliation with them that had offended him." (Congreve.)

So fond of loud report that, not to miss
Of being known (his last and utmost bliss),
He rather would be known for what he is."

It would be hard to find in Pope such compression of meaning as in the first, or such penetrative sarcasm as in the second of the passages I have underscored. Dryden's satire is still quoted for its comprehensiveness of application, Pope's rather for the elegance of its finish and the point of its phrase than for any deeper qualities.[1] I do not remember that Dryden ever makes poverty a reproach.[2] He was above it, alike by generosity of birth and mind. Pope is always the *parvenu*, always giving himself the airs of a fine gentleman, and, like Horace Walpole and Byron, affecting superiority to pro-

[1] Coleridge says excellently: "You will find this a good gauge or criterion of genius, — whether it progresses and evolves, or only spins upon itself. Take Dryden's Achitophel and Zimri; every line adds to or modifies the character, which is, as it were, a-building up to the very last verse; whereas in Pope's Timon, etc., the first two or three couplets contain all the pith of the character, and the twenty or thirty lines that follow are so much evidence or proof of overt acts of jealousy, or pride, or whatever it may be that is satirized." (*Table-Talk*, 192.) Some of Dryden's best satirical *hits* are let fall by seeming accident in his prose, as where he says of his Protestant assailants, "Most of them love all whores but her of Babylon." They had first attacked him on the score of his private morals.

[2] That he taxes Shadwell with it is only a seeming exception, as any careful reader will see.

fessional literature. Dryden, like Lessing, was a hack-writer, and was proud, as an honest man has a right to be, of being able to get his bread by his brains. He lived in Grub Street all his life, and never dreamed that where a man of genius lived was not the best quarter of the town. "Tell his Majesty," said sturdy old Jonson, "that his soul lives in an alley."

Dryden's prefaces are a mine of good writing and judicious criticism. His *obiter dicta* have often the penetration, and always more than the equity, of Voltaire's, for Dryden never loses temper, and never altogether qualifies his judgment by his self-love. "He was a more universal writer than Voltaire," said Horne Tooke, and perhaps it is true that he had a broader view, though his learning was neither so extensive nor so accurate. My space will not afford many extracts, but I cannot forbear one or two. He says of Chaucer, that "he is a perpetual fountain of good sense," [1] and likes him better than Ovid, — a bold confession in that day. He prefers the pastorals of Theocritus to those of Virgil. "Virgil's shepherds are too well read in the philosophy of Epicurus and of Plato"; "there is a kind of rusticity in all those pompous verses, somewhat of a holiday shepherd strutting in his country buskins"; [2] "Theocritus is

[1] Preface to *Fables*.

[2] Dedication of the *Georgics*.

softer than Ovid, he touches the passions more delicately, and performs all this out of his own fund, without diving into the arts and sciences for a supply. Even his Doric dialect has an incomparable sweetness in his clownishness, like a fair shepherdess, in her country russet, talking in a Yorkshire tone." [1] Comparing Virgil's verse with that of some other poets, he says, that his "numbers are perpetually varied to increase the delight of the reader, so that the same sounds are never repeated twice together. On the contrary, Ovid and Claudian, though they write in styles different from each other, yet have each of them but one sort of music in their verses. All the versification and little variety of Claudian is included within the compass of four or five lines, and then he begins again in the same tenor, perpetually closing his sense at the end of a verse, and that verse commonly which they call golden, or two substantives and two adjectives with a verb betwixt them to keep the peace. Ovid, with all his sweetness, has as little variety of numbers and sound as he; he is always, as it were, upon the hand-gallop, and his verse runs upon carpet-ground." [2] What a dreary half century would have been saved to English poetry, could Pope have laid these sentences to heart, who, accord-

[1] Preface to *Second Miscellany*.

[2] Ibid.

ing to Spence, "learned versification wholly from Dryden's works"! Upon translation, no one has written so much and so well as Dryden in his various prefaces. Whatever has been said since is either expansion or variation of what he had said before. His general theory may be stated as an aim at something between the literalness of metaphrase and the looseness of paraphrase. "Where I have enlarged," he says, "I desire the false critics would not always think that those thoughts are wholly mine, but either *they are secretly in the poet*, or may be fairly deduced from him." Coleridge, with his usual cleverness of *assimilation*, has condensed him in a letter to Wordsworth: "There is no medium between a prose version and one on the avowed principle of *compensation* in the widest sense, i. e. manner, genius, total effect." [1]

I have selected these passages, not because they are the best, but because they have a near application to Dryden himself. His own characterization of Chaucer (though too narrow for the greatest but one of English poets) is the best that could be given of himself: "He is a perpetual fountain of good sense." And the other passages show him a close and open-minded student of the art he professed. Has his influence on our literature, but especially on our poetry, been on the whole for good or evil?

[1] *Memoirs of Wordsworth*, vol. ii. p. 74 (American edition).

If he could have been read with the liberal understanding which he brought to the works of others, I should answer at once that it had been beneficial. But his translations and paraphrases, in some ways the best things he did, were done, like his plays, under contract to deliver a certain number of verses for a specified sum. The versification, of which he had learned the art by long practice, is excellent, but his haste has led him to fill out the measure of lines with phrases that add only to dilute, and thus the clearest, the most direct, the most manly versifier of his time became, without meaning it, the source (*fons et origo malorum*) of that poetic diction from which our poetry has not even yet recovered. I do not like to say it, but he has sometimes smothered the child-like simplicity of Chaucer under feather-beds of verbiage. What this kind of thing came to in the next century, when everybody ceremoniously took a bushel-basket to bring a wren's egg to market in, is only too sadly familiar. It is clear that his natural taste led Dryden to prefer directness and simplicity of style. If he was too often tempted astray by Artifice, his love of Nature betrays itself in many an almost passionate outbreak of angry remorse. Addison tells us that he took particular delight in the reading of our old English ballads. What he valued above all things was Force, though in his haste he is willing to make a shift with its

counterfeit, Effect. As usual, he had a good reason to urge for what he did: "I will not excuse, but justify myself for one pretended crime for which I am liable to be charged by false critics, not only in this translation, but in many of my original poems, — that I Latinize too much. It is true that when I find an English word significant and sounding, I neither borrow from the Latin or any other language; but when I want at home I must seek abroad. If sounding words are not of our growth and manufacture, who shall hinder me to import them from a foreign country? I carry not out the treasure of the nation which is never to return; but what I bring from Italy I spend in England: here it remains, and here it circulates; for if the coin be good, it will pass from one hand to another. I trade both with the living and the dead for the enrichment of our native language. We have enough in England to supply our necessity; but if we will have things of magnificence and splendor, we must get them by commerce. . . . Therefore, if I find a word in a classic author, I propose it to be naturalized by using it myself, and if the public approve of it the bill passes. But every man cannot distinguish betwixt pedantry and poetry; every man, therefore, is not fit to innovate."[1] This is admirably said, and

[1] *A Discourse of Epick Poetry.* "If the *public* approve." "On ne peut pas admettre dans le développement des lan-

with Dryden's accustomed penetration to the root of the matter. The Latin has given us most of our canorous words, only they must not be confounded with merely sonorous ones, still less with phrases that, instead of supplementing the sense, encumber it. It was of Latinizing in this sense that Dryden was guilty. Instead of stabbing, he "with steel invades the life." The consequence was that by and by we have Dr. Johnson's poet, Savage, telling us, —

> "In front, a parlor meets my entering view,
> Opposed a room to sweet refection due";—

Dr. Blacklock making a forlorn maiden say of her "dear," who is out late, —

> "Or by some apoplectic fit deprest
> Perhaps, alas! he seeks eternal rest";—

and Mr. Bruce, in a Danish war-song, calling on the Vikings to "assume their oars." But it must be admitted of Dryden that he seldom makes the second verse of a couplet the mere trainbearer to the first, as Pope was continually doing. In Dryden the rhyme waits upon the thought; in Pope and his school the thought curtsys to the tune for which it is written.

gues aucune révolution artificielle et sciemment exécutée; il n'y a pour elles ni conciles, ni assemblées délibérantes; on ne les réforme pas comme une constitution vicieuse." (Renan, *De l'Origine du Langage*, p. 95.)

Dryden has also been blamed for his gallicisms.[1] He tried some, it is true, but they have not been accepted. I do not think he added a single word to the language, unless, as I suspect, he first used *magnetism* in its present sense of moral attraction. What he did in his best writing was to use the English as if it were a spoken, and not merely an inkhorn language; as if it were his own to do what he pleased with it, as if it need not be ashamed of itself.[2] In this respect, his service to our prose was greater than any other man has ever rendered. He says he formed his style upon Tillotson's (Bossuet, on the other hand, formed *his* upon Corneille's); but I rather think he got it at Will's, for its great charm is that it has the various freedom of

[1] This is an old complaint. Puttenham sighs over such innovation in Elizabeth's time, and Carew in James's. A language grows, and is not made. Almost all the new-fangled words with which Johnson in his *Poetaster* taxes Marston are now current.

[2] Like most idiomatic, as distinguished from correct writers, he knew very little about the language historically or critically. His prose and poetry swarm with locutions that would have made Lindley Murray's hair stand on end. *How* little he knew is plain from his criticising in Ben Jonson the use of *ones* in the plural, of "Though Heaven should speak with all *his* wrath," and *be* "as false English for *are*, though the rhyme hides it." Yet all are good English, and I have found them all in Dryden's own writing! Of his sins against idiom I have a longer list than I have room for. And yet he is one of our highest authorities for *real* English.

talk.[1] In verse, he had a pomp which, excellent in itself, became pompousness in his imitators. But he had nothing of Milton's ear for various rhythm and interwoven harmony. He knew how to give new modulation, sweetness, and force to the pentameter; but in what used to be called pindarics, I am heretic enough to think he generally failed. His so much praised "Alexander's Feast" (in parts of it, at least) has no excuse for its slovenly metre and awkward expression, but that it was written for music. He himself tells us, in the epistle dedicatory to "King Arthur," "that the numbers of poetry and vocal music are sometimes so contrary, that in many places I have been obliged to cramp my verses and make them rugged to the reader that they may be harmonious to the hearer." His renowned ode suffered from this constraint, but this is no apology for the vulgarity of conception in too many passages.[2]

[1] To see what he rescued us from in pedantry on the one hand, and vulgarism on the other, read Feltham and Tom Brown — if you can.

[2] "Cette ode, mise en musique par Purcell (si je ne me trompe), passe en Angleterre pour le chef-d'œuvre de la poësie la plus sublime et la plus variée; et je vous avoue que, comme je sais mieux l'anglais que le grec, j'aime cent fois mieux cette ode que tout Pindare." (Voltaire to M. de Chabanon, 9 mars, 1772.)

Dryden would have agreed with Voltaire. When Chief-Justice Marlay, then a young Templar, "congratulated him

Dryden's conversion to Romanism has been commonly taken for granted as insincere, and has therefore left an abiding stain on his character, though the other mud thrown at him by angry opponents or rivals brushed off so soon as it was dry. But I think his change of faith susceptible of several explanations, none of them in any way discreditable to him. Where Church and State are habitually associated, it is natural that minds even of a high order should unconsciously come to regard religion as only a subtler mode of police.[1] Dryden, conservative by nature, had discovered before Joseph de Maistre, that Protestantism, so long as it justified its name by continuing to be an active principle, was the abettor of Republicanism, perhaps the vanguard of Anarchy. I think this is hinted in more than one passage in his preface to "The Hind and the Panther." He may very well have preferred Romanism because of its elder claim to authority in all matters of doctrine, but I think he had a deeper reason in the constitution of his own mind. That he was "naturally inclined to scepticism in philosophy," he tells us of himself in

on having produced the finest and noblest Ode that had ever been written in any language, 'You are right, young gentleman [replied Dryden], a nobler Ode never *was* produced, nor ever *will*.'" (Malone.)

[1] This was true of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and still more of Southey, who in some respects was not unlike Dryden.

the Preface to the "Religio Laici"; but he was a sceptic with an imaginative side, and in such characters scepticism and superstition play into each other's hands. This finds a curious illustration in a letter to his sons, written four years before his death: "Towards the latter end of this month, September, Charles will begin to recover his perfect health, according to his Nativity, which, casting it myself, I am sure is true, and all things hitherto have happened accordingly to the very time that I predicted them." Have we forgotten Montaigne's votive offerings at the shrine of Loreto?

Dryden was short of body, inclined to stoutness, and florid of complexion. He is said to have had "a sleepy eye," but was handsome and of a manly carriage. He "was not a very genteel man, he was intimate with none but poetical men.[1] He was said to be a very good man by all that knew him: he was as plump as Mr. Pitt, of a fresh color and a down look, and not very conversible." So Pope described him to Spence. He was friendly to rising merit, as to

[1] Pope's notion of gentility was perhaps expressed in a letter from Lord Cobham to him: "I congratulate you upon the fine weather. 'T is a strange thing that people of condition and men of parts must enjoy it in common with the rest of the world." (Ruffhead's *Pope*, p. 276, note.) His Lordship's naïve distinction between people of condition and men of parts is as good as Pope's between genteel and poetical men. I fancy the poet grinning savagely as he read it.

Congreve, for instance. Cibber says he was a poor reader. He still reigns in literary tradition, as when at Will's[1] his elbow-chair had the best place by the fire in winter, or on the balcony in summer, and when a pinch from his snuff-box made a young author blush with pleasure as would nowadays a favorable notice in the "Saturday Review." What gave and secures for him this singular eminence? To put it in a single word, I think that his qualities and faculties were in that rare combination which makes character. This gave *flavor* to whatever he wrote — a very rare quality.

Was he, then, a great poet? Hardly, in the narrowest definition. But he was a strong thinker who sometimes carried common sense to a height where it catches the light of a diviner air, and warmed reason till it had well-nigh the illuminating property of intuition. Certainly he is not, like Spenser, the poets' poet, but other men have also their rights. Even the Philistine is a man and a brother, and is entirely right so far as he sees. To demand more of him is to be unreasonable. And he sees, among other things, that a man who undertakes to write should first have a meaning perfectly defined to himself, and then should be able to set it forth clearly in the best

[1] "This may confine their younger styles
Whom Dryden pedagogues at Will's."
(Prior, *Epistle to Shephard*, 1689.)

words. This is precisely Dryden's praise,[1] and amid the rickety sentiment looming big through misty phrase which marks so much of modern literature, to read him is as bracing as a north-west wind. He blows the mind clear. In mind and manner his foremost quality is energy. In ripeness of mind and bluff heartiness of expression, he takes rank with the best. His phrase is always a short cut to his sense, for his estate was too spacious for him to need that trick of winding the path of his thought about, and planting it out with clumps of epithet, by which the landscape-gardeners of literature give to a paltry half acre the air of a park. In poetry, to be next-best is, in one sense, to be nothing; and yet to be among the first in any kind of writing, as Dryden certainly was, is to be one of a very small company. He had, beyond most, the gift of the right word. And if he does not, like one or two of the greater masters of song, stir our sympathies by that indefinable aroma so magical in arousing the subtile associations of the soul, he has this in common with the few great writers, that the winged seeds of his thought embed themselves in the memory and germinate there. If I could be guilty of the absurdity of recommending to a young man any

[1] "Nothing is truly sublime," he himself said, "that is not just and proper." Sir Henry Wotton said of Sidney that "his wit was the very measure of congruity."

author on whom to form his style, I should tell him that, next to having something that will not stay unsaid, he could find no safer guide than Dryden.

Cowper, in a letter to Mr. Unwin (5th January, 1782), expresses what I think is the common feeling about Dryden, that, with all his defects, he had that indefinable something we call Genius. "But I admire Dryden most [he had been speaking of Pope], who has succeeded by mere dint of genius, and in spite of a laziness and a carelessness almost peculiar to himself. His faults are numberless, and so are his beauties. His faults are those of a great man, and his beauties are such (at least sometimes) as Pope with all his touching and retouching could never equal." But, after all, perhaps no man has summed him up so well as John Dennis, one of Pope's typical dunces, a dull man outside of his own sphere, as men are apt to be, but who had some sound notions as a critic, and thus became the object of Pope's fear and therefore of his resentment. Dennis speaks of him as his "departed friend, whom I infinitely esteemed when living for the solidity of his thought, for the spring and the warmth and the beautiful turn of it; for the power and variety and fulness of his harmony; for the purity, the perspicuity, the energy of his expression; and, whenever these great qualities are required, for the pomp and

solemnity and majesty of his style." [1] And yet there is something unhappily suggestive in what Congreve accidentally lets drop in describing his funeral, where, he says, "We had an ode in Horace sung instead of David's Psalms." His burial, he tells us, "was the same with his life: variety and not of a piece; the quality and mob; farce and heroics; the sublime and ridicule mixt in a piece; great Cleopatra in a hackney-coach." I know not how true this may be, but the last phrase better characterizes Dryden's poetry in four words than a page of disquisition could. But he knew how to "give his soul a loose," and ours too, as only the great know.

[1] Dennis, in a letter to Tonson, 1715.

POPE

1871

THE condition of the English mind at the close of the seventeenth century was such as to make it particularly sensitive to the magnetism which streamed to it from Paris. The loyalty of everybody both in politics and religion had been put out of joint. A generation of materialists, by the natural rebound which inevitably follows overtension, was to balance the ultra-spiritualism of the Puritans. As always when a political revolution has been wrought by moral agencies, the plunder had fallen mainly to the share of the greedy, selfish and unscrupulous, whose disgusting cant had given a taint of hypocrisy to piety itself. Religion, from a burning conviction of the soul, had grown to be with both parties a political badge, as little typical of the inward man as the scallop of a pilgrim. Sincerity is impossible, unless it pervade the whole being, and the pretence of it saps the very foundation of character. There seems to have been an universal scepticism, and in its worst form, that is, with an outward conformity in the interest of decorum and order. There was an unbelief that did not believe even in itself.

The difference between the leading minds of the former age and that which was supplanting it went to the very roots of the soul. Milton was willing to peril the success of his crowning work by making the poetry of it a stalking-horse for his theological convictions. What was that Fame

> "Which the clear spirit doth raise
> To scorn delights and live laborious days"—

to the crown of a good preacher who sets

> "The hearts of men on fire
> To scorn the sordid world and unto heaven aspire"?

Dean Swift, who aspired to the mitre, could write a book whose moral, if it had any, was that one religion was as good as another, since all were political devices, and accepted a cure of souls when it was more than doubtful whether he believed that his fellow creatures had any souls to be saved, or, if they had, whether they were worth saving. The answer which Pulci's Margutte makes to Morgante, when asked if he believed in Christ or Mahomet, would have expressed well enough the creed of the majority of that generation:—

> "To tell thee truly,
> My faith in black 's no greater than in azure,
> But I believe in capons, roast-meat, bouilli,
> And in good wine my faith 's beyond all measure." [1]

[1] *Morgante*, xviii. 115.

It was a carnival of intellect without faith, when men could be Protestant or Catholic, both at once, or by turns, or neither, as suited their interest, when they could swear one allegiance and keep on safe terms with the other, when prime ministers and commanders-in-chief could be intelligencers of the Pretender, nay, when even Algernon Sidney himself could be a pensioner of France. What morality there was, was the morality of appearances, of the side that is turned toward men and not toward God. The very shamelessness of Congreve is refreshing in that age of sham.

It was impossible that anything truly great, that is, great on the moral and emotional as well as the intellectual side, should be produced by such a generation. But something intellectually great could be and was. The French mind, always stronger in perceptive and analytic than in imaginative qualities, loving precision, grace, and finesse, prone to attribute an almost magical power to the scientific regulation whether of politics or religion, had brought wit and fancy and the elegant arts of society to as great perfection as was possible by the *a priori* method. Its ideal in literature was to conjure passion within the magic circle of courtliness, or to combine the appearance of careless ease and gayety of thought with intellectual exactness of statement. The eternal watchfulness of a wit that

never slept had made it distrustful of the natural emotions and the unconventional expression of them, and its first question about a sentiment was, Will it be *safe?* about a phrase, Will it pass with the Academy? The effect of its example on English literature would appear chiefly in neatness and facility of turn, in point and epigrammatic compactness of phrase, and these in conveying conventional sentiments and emotions, in appealing to good society rather than to human nature. Its influence would be greatest where its success had been most marked, in what was called moral poetry, whose chosen province was manners, and in which satire, with its avenging scourge, took the place of that profounder art whose office it was to purify, not the manners, but the source of them in the soul, by pity and terror. The mistake of the whole school of French criticism, it seems to me, lay in its tendency to confound what was common with what was vulgar, in a too exclusive deference to authority at the expense of all free movement of the mind.

There are certain defects of taste which correct themselves by their own extravagance. Language, I suspect, is more apt to be reformed by the charm of some master of it, like Milton, than by any amount of precept. The influence of second-rate writers for evil is at best ephemeral, for true style, the joint result of culture

and natural aptitude, is always in fashion, as fine manners always are, in whatever clothes. Perhaps some reform was needed when Quarles, who had no mean gift of poesy, could write, —

> "My passion has no April in her eyes:
> I cannot spend in mists; I cannot mizzle;
> My fluent brains are too severe to drizzle
> Slight drops." [1]

Good taste is an excellent thing when it confines itself to its own rightful province of the proprieties, but when it attempts to correct those profound instincts out of whose judgments the higher principles of æsthetics have been formulated, its success is a disaster. During the era when the French theory of poetry was supreme, we notice a decline from imagination to fancy, from passion to wit, from metaphor, which fuses image and thought in one, to simile, which sets one beside the other, from the supreme code of the natural sympathies to the parochial by-laws of etiquette. The imagination instinctively Platonizes, and it is the essence of poetry that it should be unconventional, that the soul of

[1] *Elegie on Doctor Wilson.* But if Quarles had been led astray by the vices of Donne's manner, he had good company in Herbert and Vaughan. In common with them, too, he had that luck of simpleness which is even more delightful than wit. In the same poem he says, —

> "Go, glorious soul, and lay thy temples down
> In Abram's bosom, *in the sacred down*
> *Of soft eternity.*"

it should subordinate the outward parts; while the artificial method proceeds from a principle the reverse of this, making the spirit lackey the form.

Waller preaches up this new doctrine in the epilogue to the "Maid's Tragedy": —

> "Nor is 't less strange such mighty wits as those
> Should use a style in tragedy like prose;
> Well-sounding verse, where princes tread the stage,
> Should speak their virtue and describe their rage."

That it should be beneath the dignity of princes to speak in anything but rhyme can only be paralleled by Mr. Puff's law that a heroine can go decorously mad only in white satin. Waller, I suppose, though with so loose a thinker one cannot be positive, uses "describe" in its Latin sense of limitation. Fancy Othello or Lear confined to this go-cart! Phillips touches the true point when he says, "And the truth is, the use of measure alone, without any rime at all, would give far more ample scope and liberty both to style and fancy than can possibly be observed in rime."[1] But let us test Waller's method by an example or two. His monarch made *reasonable* thus discourses: —

> "Courage our greatest failings does supply,
> And makes all good, or handsomely we die.
> Life is a thing of common use; by heaven
> As well to insects as to monarchs given;

[1] Preface to the *Theatrum*.

> But for the crown, 't is a more sacred thing;
> I 'll dying lose it, or I 'll live a king.
> Come, Diphilus, we must together walk
> And of a matter of importance talk." [*Exeunt.*

Blank verse, where the sentiment is trivial as here, merely removes prose to a proper ideal distance, where it is in keeping with more impassioned parts, but commonplace set to this rocking-horse jog irritates the nerves. There is nothing here to remind us of the older tragic style but the *exeunt* at the close. Its pithy conciseness and the relief which it brings us from his majesty's prosing give it an almost poetical savor. Aspatia's reflections upon suicide (or "suppressing our breath," as she calls it), in the same play, will make few readers regret that Shakespeare was left to his own unassisted barbarism when he wrote Hamlet's soliloquy on the same topic: —

> " 'T was in compassion of our woe
> That Nature first made poisons grow,
> For hopeless wretches such as I
> Kindly providing means to die:
> As mothers do their children keep,
> So Nature feeds and makes us sleep.
> The indisposed she does invite
> To go to bed before 't is night."

Correctness in this case is but a synonym of monotony, and words are chosen for the number of their syllables, for their rubbishy value

to fill-in, instead of being forced upon the poet by the meaning which occupies the mind. Language becomes useful for its diluting properties, rather than as the medium by means of which the thought or fancy precipitate themselves in crystals upon a connecting thread of purpose. Let us read a few verses from Beaumont and Fletcher, that we may feel fully the difference between the rude and the reformed styles. This also shall be a speech of Aspatia's. Antiphila, one of her maidens, is working the story of Theseus and Ariadne in tapestry, for the older masters loved a picturesque background and knew the value of fanciful accessories. Aspatia thinks the face of Ariadne not sad enough: —

> "Do it by me,
> Do it again by me, the lost Aspatia,
> And you shall find all true but the wild island.
> Suppose I stand upon the seabeach now,
> Mine arms thus, and my hair blown with the wind,
> Wild as that desert; and let all about me
> Be teachers of my story. Do my face
> (If ever thou hadst feeling of a sorrow)
> Thus, thus, Antiphila; strive to make me look
> Like sorrow's monument; and the trees about me
> Let them be dry and leafless; let the rocks
> Groan with continual surges; and behind me
> Make all a desolation."

What instinctive felicity of versification! what sobbing breaks and passionate repetitions are here!

We see what the direction of the new tendency was, but it would be an inadequate or a dishonest criticism that should hold Pope responsible for the narrow compass of the instrument which was his legacy from his immediate predecessors, any more than for the wearisome thrumming-over of his tune by those who came after him and who had caught his technical skill without his genius. The question properly stated is, How much was it possible to make of the material supplied by the age in which he lived? and how much did he make of it? Thus far, among the great English poets who preceded him, we have seen actual life represented by Chaucer, imaginative life by Spenser, ideal life by Shakespeare, the interior life by Milton. But as everything aspires to a rhythmical utterance of itself, so conventional life, itself a new phenomenon, was waiting for its poet. It found or made a most fitting one in Pope. He stands for exactness of intellectual expression, for perfect propriety of phrase (I speak of him at his best), and is a striking instance how much success and permanence of reputation depend on conscientious finish as well as on native endowment. Butler asks, —

> "Then why should those who pick and choose
> The best of all the best compose,
> And join it by Mosaic art,
> In graceful order, part to part,

To make the whole in beauty suit,
Not merit as complete repute
As those who, with less art and pain,
Can do it with their native brain?"

Butler knew very well that precisely what stamps a man as an artist is this power of finding out what *is* "the best of all the best."

I confess that I come to the treatment of Pope with diffidence. I was brought up in the old superstition that he was the greatest poet that ever lived; and when I came to find that I had instincts of my own, and my mind was brought in contact with the apostles of a more esoteric doctrine of poetry, I felt that ardent desire for smashing the idols I had been brought up to worship, without any regard to their artistic beauty, which characterizes youthful zeal. What was it to me that Pope was called a master of style? I felt, as Addison says in his "Freeholder" when answering an argument in favor of the Pretender because he could speak English and George I. could not, "that I did not wish to be tyrannized over in the best English that ever was spoken." The young demand thoughts that find an echo in their real and not their acquired nature, and care very little about the dress they are put in. It is later that we learn to like the conventional, as we do olives. There was a time when I could not read Pope, but disliked him on principle, as old Roger Ascham

seems to have felt about Italy when he says, "I was once in Italy myself, but I thank God my abode there was only nine days."

But Pope fills a very important place in the history of English poetry, and must be studied by every one who would come to a clear knowledge of it. I have since read over every line that Pope ever wrote, and every letter written by or to him, and that more than once. If I have not come to the conclusion that he is the greatest of poets, I believe that I am at least in a condition to allow him every merit that is fairly his. I have said that Pope as a literary man represents precision and grace of expression; but as a poet he represents something more, — nothing less, namely, than one of those eternal controversies of taste which will last as long as the imagination and understanding divide men between them. It is not a matter to be settled by any amount of argument or demonstration. There are born Popists or Wordsworthians, Lockists or Kantists, and there is nothing more to be said of the matter.

Wordsworth was not in a condition to do Pope justice. A man brought up in sublime mountain solitudes, and whose nature was a solitude more vast than they, walking on earth which quivered with the throe of the French Revolution, the child of an era of profound mental and moral movement, it could not be

expected that he should be in sympathy with the poet of artificial life. Moreover, he was the apostle of imagination, and came at a time when the school which Pope founded had degenerated into a mob of mannerists who wrote with ease, and who with their congenial critics united at once to decry poetry which brought in the dangerous innovation of having a soul in it.

But however it may be with poets, it is very certain that a reader is happiest whose mind is broad enough to enjoy the natural school for its nature, and the artificial for its artificiality, provided they be only good of their kind. At any rate, we must allow that the man who can produce one perfect work is either a great genius or a very lucky one; and so far as we who read are concerned, it is of secondary importance which. And Pope has done this in the "Rape of the Lock." For wit, fancy, invention, and keeping, it has never been surpassed. I do not say there is in it poetry of the highest order, or that Pope is a poet whom any one would choose as the companion of his best hours. There is no inspiration in it, no trumpet-call, but for pure entertainment it is unmatched. There are two kinds of genius. The first and highest may be said to speak out of the eternal to the present, and must compel its age to understand *it*; the second understands its age, and tells it what it

wishes to be told. Let us find strength and inspiration in the one, amusement and instruction in the other, and be honestly thankful for both.

The very earliest of Pope's productions give indications of that sense and discretion, as well as wit, which afterward so eminently distinguished him. The facility of expression is remarkable, and we find also that perfect balance of metre, which he afterward carried so far as to be wearisome. His pastorals were written in his sixteenth year, and their publication immediately brought him into notice. The following four verses from his first pastoral are quite characteristic in their antithetic balance: —

> "You that, too wise for pride, too good for power,
> Enjoy the glory to be great no more,
> And carrying with you all the world can boast,
> To all the world illustriously are lost!"

The sentiment is affected, and reminds one of that future period of Pope's Correspondence with his Friends, when Swift, his heart corroding with disappointed ambition at Dublin, Bolingbroke raising delusive turnips at his farm, and Pope pretending not to feel the lampoons which embittered his life, played together the solemn farce of affecting indifference to the world by which it would have agonized them to be forgotten, and wrote letters addressed to each other, but really intended for

that posterity whose opinion they assumed to despise.

In these pastorals there is an entire want of nature. For example, in that on the death of Mrs. Tempest: —

"Her fate is whispered by the gentle breeze
And told in sighs to all the trembling trees;
The trembling trees, in every plain and wood,
Her fate remurmur to the silver flood;
The silver flood, so lately calm, appears
Swelled with new passion, and o'erflows with tears;
The winds and trees and floods her death deplore,
Daphne, our grief! our glory now no more!"

All this is as perfectly professional as the mourning of an undertaker. Still worse, Pope materializes and makes too palpably objective that sympathy which our grief forces upon outward nature. Milton, before making the echoes mourn for Lycidas, puts our feelings in tune, as it were, and hints at his own imagination as the source of this emotion in inanimate things, —

"But, O the heavy change now thou art gone!"

In "Windsor Forest" we find the same thing again: —

"Here his first lays majestic Denham sung,
There the last numbers flowed from Cowley's tongue;
O early lost, what tears the river shed
When the sad pomp along his banks was led!
His drooping swans on every note expire,
And on his willows hung each muse's lyre!"

In the same poem he indulges the absurd conceit that, —

> "Beasts urged by us, their fellow beasts pursue,
> And learn of man each other to undo"; —

and in the succeeding verses gives some striking instances of that artificial diction, so inappropriate to poems descriptive of natural objects and ordinary life, which brought verse-making to such a depth of absurdity in the course of the century.

> "With slaughtering guns, the unwearied fowler roves
> Where frosts have whitened all the naked groves;
> Where doves in flocks the leafless trees o'ershade,
> And lonely woodcocks haunt the watery glade;
> He lifts the tube and levels with his eye,
> Straight a short thunder breaks the frozen sky:
> Oft as in airy rings they skim the heath,
> The clamorous lapwings feel the leaden death;
> Oft as the mounting larks their notes prepare,
> They fall and leave their little lives in air."

Now one would imagine that the *tube* of the fowler was a telescope instead of a gun. And think of the larks preparing their notes like a country choir! Yet even here there are admirable lines, —

> "Oft as in airy rings they skim the heath,"
>
> "They fall and leave their little lives in air," —

for example.

In Pope's next poem, the "Essay on Criticism," the wit and poet become apparent. It is

full of clear thoughts, compactly expressed. In this poem, written when Pope was only twenty-one, occur some of those lines which have become proverbial; such as

"A little learning is a dangerous thing";

"For fools rush in where angels fear to tread";

"True wit is Nature to advantage dressed,
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed."

"For each ill author is as bad a friend."

In all of these we notice that terseness in which (regard being had to his especial range of thought) Pope has never been equalled. One cannot help being struck also with the singular *discretion* which the poem gives evidence of. I do not know where to look for another author in whom it appeared so early; and, considering the vivacity of his mind and the constantly besetting temptation of his wit, it is still more wonderful. In his boyish correspondence with poor old Wycherley, one would suppose him to be the man and Wycherley the youth. Pope's understanding was no less vigorous (when not the dupe of his nerves) than his fancy was lightsome and sprightly.

I come now to what in itself would be enough to have immortalized him as a poet, the "Rape of the Lock," in which, indeed, he appears more purely as poet than in any other of his productions. Elsewhere he has shown more force, more

wit, more reach of thought, but nowhere such a truly artistic combination of elegance and fancy. His genius has here found its true direction, and the very same artificiality, which in his pastorals was unpleasing, heightens the effect, and adds to the general keeping. As truly as Shakespeare is the poet of man, as God made him, dealing with great passions and innate motives, so truly is Pope the poet of society, the delineator of manners, the exposer of those motives which may be called *acquired*, whose spring is in institutions and habits of purely worldly origin.

The "Rape of the Lock" was written in Pope's twenty-fourth year, and the machinery of the Sylphs was added at the suggestion of Dr. Garth, — a circumstance for which we can feel a more unmixed gratitude to him than for writing the "Dispensary." The idea was taken from that entertaining book "The Count de Gabalis," in which Fouqué afterward found the hint for his "Undine"; but the little sprites as they appear in the poem are purely the creation of Pope's fancy.

The theory of the poem is excellent. The heroic is out of the question in fine society. It is perfectly true that almost every door we pass in the street closes upon its private tragedy, but the moment a *great* passion enters a man he passes at once out of the artificial into the

human. So long as he continues artificial, the sublime is a conscious absurdity to him. The mock-heroic then is the only way in which the petty actions and sufferings of the fine world can be epically treated, and the contrast continually suggested with subjects of larger scope and more dignified treatment, makes no small part of the pleasure and sharpens the point of the wit. The invocation is admirable: —

> "Say, what strange motive, Goddess, could compel,
> A well-bred lord to assault a gentle belle?
> O say what stranger cause, yet unexplored,
> Could make a gentle belle reject a lord?"

The keynote of the poem is here struck, and we are able to put ourselves in tune with it. It is not a parody of the heroic style, but only a setting it in satirical juxtaposition with cares and events and modes of thought with which it is in comical antipathy, and while *it* is not degraded, *they* are shown in their triviality. The "clouded cane," as compared with the Homeric spear, indicates the difference of scale, the lower plane of emotions and passions. The opening of the action, too, is equally good: —

> "Sol through white curtains shot a timorous ray,
> And oped those eyes that must eclipse the day,
> Now lapdogs give themselves the rousing shake,
> And sleepless lovers just at twelve awake;
> Thrice rung the bell, the slipper knocked the ground,
> And the pressed watch returned a silver sound."

The mythology of the Sylphs is full of the most fanciful wit; indeed, wit infused with fancy is Pope's peculiar merit. The Sylph is addressing Belinda: —

"Know, then, unnumbered spirits round thee fly,
The light militia of the lower sky;
These, though unseen, are ever on the wing,
Hang o'er the box and hover round the ring.
As now your own our beings were of old,
And once enclosed in woman's beauteous mould;
Think not, when woman's transient breath is fled,
That all her vanities at once are dead;
Succeeding vanities she still regards,
And, though she plays no more, o'erlooks the cards.
For when the fair in all their pride expire,
To their first elements their souls retire;
The sprites of fiery termagants in flame
Mount up and take a salamander's name;
Soft yielding nymphs to water glide away
And sip, with nymphs, their elemental tea;
The graver prude sinks downward to a gnome,
In search of mischief still on earth to roam;
The light coquettes in sylphs aloft repair
And sport and flutter in the fields of air."

And the contrivance by which Belinda is awakened is also perfectly in keeping with all the rest of the machinery: —

"He said: when Shock, who thought she slept too long,
Leaped up and waked his mistress with his tongue;
'T was then, Belinda, if report say true,
Thy eyes first opened on a *billet-doux*."

Throughout this poem the satiric wit of Pope

peeps out in the pleasantest little smiling ways, as where, in describing the toilet-table, he says: —

"Here files of pins extend their shining rows,
Puffs, powders, patches, Bibles, *billet-doux*."

Or when, after the fatal lock has been severed, —

"Then flashed the living lightning from her eyes,
And screams of horror rend the affrighted skies,
Not louder shrieks to pitying Heaven are cast
When husbands or when lapdogs breathe their last;
Or when rich china-vessels, fallen from high,
In glittering dust and painted fragments lie!"

And so, when the conflict begins: —

"Now Jove suspends his golden scales in air;
Weighs the men's wits against the ladies' hair;
The doubtful beam long nods from side to side;
At length the wits mount up, the hairs subside."

But more than the wit and fancy, I think, the perfect keeping of the poem deserves admiration. Except a touch of grossness, here and there, there is the most pleasing harmony in all the conceptions and images. The punishments which he assigns to the Sylphs who neglect their duty are charmingly appropriate and ingenious: —

"Whatever spirit, careless of his charge,
His post neglects, or leaves the fair at large,
Shall feel sharp vengeance soon o'ertake his sins;
Be stopped in vials or transfixed with pins,

Or plunged in lakes of bitter washes lie,
Or wedged whole ages in a bodkin's eye;
Gums and pomatums shall his flight restrain,
While clogged he beats his silver wings in vain;
Or alum styptics with contracting power,
Shrink his thin essence like a rivelled flower;
Or as Ixion fixed the wretch shall feel
The giddy motion of the whirling wheel,
In fumes of burning chocolate shall glow,
And tremble at the sea that froths below!"

The speech of Thalestris, too, with its droll climax, is equally good: —

"Methinks already I your tears survey,
Already hear the horrid things they say,
Already see you a degraded toast,
And all your honor in a whisper lost!
How shall I then your helpless fame defend?
'T will then be infamy to seem your friend!
And shall this prize, the inestimable prize,
Exposed through crystal to the gazing eyes,
And heightened by the diamond's circling rays,
On that rapacious hand forever blaze?
Sooner shall grass in Hydepark Circus grow,
And wits take lodging in the sound of Bow,
Sooner let earth, air, sea, in chaos fall,
Men, monkeys, lapdogs, parrots, perish all!"

So also Belinda's account of the morning omens: —

"'T was this the morning omens seemed to tell;
Thrice from my trembling hand the patch-box fell;
The tottering china shook without a wind;
Nay, Poll sat mute, and Shock was most unkind."

The idea of the goddess of Spleen, and of her palace, where

"The dreaded East is all the wind that blows," —

was a very happy one. In short, the whole poem more truly deserves the name of a creation than anything Pope ever wrote. The action is confined to a world of his own, the supernatural agency is wholly of his own contrivance, and nothing is allowed to overstep the limitations of the subject. It ranks by itself as one of the purest works of human fancy; whether that fancy be strictly poetical or not is another matter. If we compare it with the "Midsummer Night's Dream," an uncomfortable doubt is suggested. The perfection of form in the "Rape of the Lock" is to me conclusive evidence that in it the natural genius of Pope found fuller and freer expression than in any other of his poems. The others are aggregates of brilliant passages rather than harmonious wholes.

It is a droll illustration of the inconsistencies of human nature, a more profound satire than Pope himself ever wrote, that his fame should chiefly rest upon the "Essay on Man." It has been praised and admired by men of the most opposite beliefs, and men of no belief at all. Bishops and free-thinkers have met here on a common ground of sympathetic approval. And, indeed, there is no particular faith in it. It is a

droll medley of inconsistent opinions. It proves only two things beyond a question, — that Pope was not a great thinker; and that wherever he found a thought, no matter what, he could express it so tersely, so clearly, and with such smoothness of versification as to give it an everlasting currency. Hobbes's unwieldy "Leviathan," left stranded there on the shore of the last age, and nauseous with the stench of its selfishness, — from this Pope distilled a fragrant oil with which to fill the brilliant lamps of his philosophy, — lamps like those in the tombs of alchemists, that go out the moment the healthy air is let in upon them. The only positive doctrines in the poem are the selfishness of Hobbes set to music, and the Pantheism of Spinoza brought down from mysticism to commonplace. Nothing can be more absurd than many of the dogmas taught in this "Essay on Man." For example, Pope affirms explicitly that instinct is something better than reason: —

"See him from Nature rising slow to art,
To copy instinct then was reason's part;
Thus, then, to man the voice of Nature spake; —
Go, from the creatures thy instructions take;
Learn from the beasts what food the thickets yield;
Learn from the birds the physic of the field;
The arts of building from the bee receive;
Learn of the mole to plough, the worm to weave;
Learn of the little nautilus to sail,
Spread the thin oar, or catch the driving gale."

I say nothing of the quiet way in which the general term "Nature" is substituted for God, but how unutterably void of reasonableness is the theory that Nature would have left her highest product, man, destitute of that instinct with which she had endowed her other creatures! As if reason were not the most sublimated form of instinct. The accuracy on which Pope prided himself, and for which he is commended, was not accuracy of thought so much as of expression. And he cannot always even claim this merit, but only that of correct rhyme, as in one of the passages I have already quoted from the "Rape of the Lock" he talks of *casting* shrieks to heaven, — a performance of some difficulty, except when *cast* is needed to rhyme with *last*.

But the supposition is that in the "Essay on Man" Pope did not himself know what he was writing. He was only the condenser and epigrammatizer of Bolingbroke, — a very fitting St. John for such a gospel. Or, if he *did* know, we can account for the contradictions by supposing that he threw in some of the commonplace moralities to conceal his real drift. Johnson asserts that Bolingbroke in private laughed at Pope's having been made the mouthpiece of opinions which he did not hold. But this is hardly probable when we consider the relations between them. It is giving Pope altogether too

little credit for intelligence to suppose that he did not understand the principles of his intimate friend. The caution with which he at first concealed the authorship would argue that he had doubts as to the reception of the poem. When it was attacked on the score of infidelity, he gladly accepted Warburton's championship, and assumed whatever pious interpretation he contrived to thrust upon it. The beginning of the poem is familiar to everybody: —

> "Awake, my St. John, leave all meaner things
> To low ambition and the pride of kings;
> Let us (since life can little more supply
> Than just to look about us and to die)
> Expatiate free o'er all this scene of man,
> A mighty maze, — but not without a plan."

To expatiate *o'er* a mighty maze is rather loose writing, but the last verse, as it stood in the original editions, was, —

> "A mighty maze of walks without a plan"; —

and perhaps this came nearer Pope's real opinion than the verse he substituted for it. Warburton is careful not to mention *this* variation in his notes. The poem is everywhere as remarkable for its confusion of logic as it often is for ease of verse and grace of expression. An instance of both occurs in a passage frequently quoted: —

> "Heaven from all creatures hides the book of fate;
> All but the page prescribed, their present state;

From brutes what men, from men what spirits know,
Or who would suffer being here below ?
The lamb thy riot dooms to bleed to-day,
Had he thy reason, would he skip and play ?
Pleased to the last, he crops the flowery food,
And licks the hand just raised to shed his blood.
O, blindness to the future kindly given
That each may fill the circle meant by heaven !
Who sees with equal eye, as God of all,
A hero perish or a sparrow fall,
Atoms or systems into ruin hurled,
And now a bubble burst, and now a world ! "

Now, if " heaven from all creatures hides the book of fate," why should not the lamb " skip and play," if he had the reason of man ? Why, because he would then be able to read the book of fate. But if man himself cannot, why, then, could the lamb with the reason of man ? For, if the lamb had the reason of man, the book of fate would still be hidden, so far as himself was concerned. If the inferences we can draw from appearances are equivalent to a knowledge of destiny, the knowing enough to take an umbrella in cloudy weather might be called so. There is a manifest confusion between what we know about ourselves and about other people ; the whole point of the passage being that we are always mercifully blinded to *our own* future, however much reason we may possess. There is also inaccuracy as well as inelegance in saying, —

"Heaven,
Who sees with equal eye, as God of all,
A hero perish or a sparrow fall."

To the last verse Warburton, desirous of reconciling his author with Scripture, appends a note referring to Matthew x. 29: "Are not two sparrows sold for one farthing? and one of them shall not fall to the ground without your Father." It would not have been safe to have referred to the thirty-first verse: "Fear ye not, therefore, *ye are of more value* than many sparrows."

To my feeling, one of the most beautiful passages in the whole poem is that familiar one:—

"Lo, the poor Indian whose untutored mind
Sees God in clouds, or hears him in the wind,
His soul proud science never taught to stray
Far as the solar walk or milky way:
Yet simple Nature to his hope has given
Behind the cloud-topt hill a humbler heaven;
Some safer world in depth of woods embraced,
Some happier island in the watery waste,
Where slaves once more their native land behold,
No fiends torment, no Christians thirst for gold.
To *be* contents his natural desire,
He asks no angel's wing, no seraph's fire,
But thinks, admitted to that equal sky,
His faithful dog shall bear him company."

But this comes in as a corollary to what went just before:—

"Hope springs eternal in the human breast,
Man never is but always to be blest;
The soul, uneasy, and confined from home,
Rests and expatiates in a life to come."

Then follows immediately the passage about the poor Indian, who, after all, it seems, is contented with merely *being*, and whose soul, therefore, is an exception to the general rule. And what have the "solar walk" (as he calls it) and "milky way" to do with the affair? Does our hope of heaven depend on our knowledge of astronomy? Or does he mean that science and faith are necessarily hostile? And, after being told that it is the "untutored mind" of the savage which "sees God in clouds and hears him in the wind," we are rather surprised to find that the lesson the poet intends to teach is that

"All are but parts of one stupendous whole,
Whose body Nature is, and God the soul,
That, changed through all, and yet in all the same,
Great in the earth, as in the ethereal frame,
Warms in the sun, refreshes in the breeze,
Glows in the stars, and blossoms in the trees."

So that we are no better off than the untutored Indian, after the poet has tutored us. Dr. Warburton makes a rather lame attempt to ward off the charge of Spinozism from this last passage. He would have found it harder to show that the acknowledgment of any divine revelation

would not overturn the greater part of its teachings. If Pope intended by his poem all that the bishop takes for granted in his commentary, we must deny him what is usually claimed as his first merit, — clearness. If he did *not*, we grant him clearness as a writer at the expense of sincerity as a man. Perhaps a more charitable solution of the difficulty would be, that Pope's precision of thought was no match for the fluency of his verse.

Lord Byron goes so far as to say, in speaking of Pope, that he who executes the best, no matter what his department, will rank the highest. I think there are enough indications in these letters of Byron's, however, that they were written rather more against Wordsworth than for Pope. The rule he lays down would make Voltaire a greater poet, in some respects, than Shakespeare. Byron cites Petrarch as an example; yet if Petrarch had put nothing more into his sonnets than *execution*, there are plenty of Italian sonneteers who would be his match. But, in point of fact, the department chooses the man and not the man the department, and it has a great deal to do with our estimate of him. Is the department of Milton no higher than that of Butler? Byron took especial care not to write in the style he commended. But I think Pope has received quite as much credit in respect even of execution as he deserves.

Surely execution is not confined to versification alone. What can be worse than this?

> "At length Erasmus, that great, injured name
> (The glory of the priesthood and the shame),
> Stemmed the wild torrent of a barbarous age,
> And drove those holy vandals off the stage."

It would have been hard for Pope to have found a prettier piece of confusion in any of the small authors he laughed at than this image of a great, injured name stemming a torrent and driving vandals off the stage. And in the following verses the image is helplessly confused: —

> "Kind self-conceit to some her glass applies,
> Which no one looks in with another's eyes,
> But, as the flatterer or dependant paint,
> Beholds himself a patriot, chief, or saint."

The use of the word "applies" is perfectly un-English; and it seems that people who look in this remarkable glass see their pictures and not their reflections. Often, also, when Pope attempts the sublime, his epithets become curiously unpoetical, as where he says, in the "Dunciad," —

> "As, one by one, at dread Medea's strain,
> The sickening stars fade off *the ethereal plain*."

And not seldom he is satisfied with the music of the verse without much regard to fitness of imagery; in the "Essay on Man," for example: —

"Passions, like elements, though born to fight,
Yet, mixed and softened, in his work unite;
These 't is enough to temper and employ;
But what composes man can man destroy?
Suffice that Reason keep to Nature's road,
Subject, compound them, follow her and God.
Love, Hope, and Joy, fair Pleasure's smiling train,
Hate, Fear, and Grief, the family of Pain,
These, mixed with Art, and to due bounds confined
Make and maintain the balance of the mind."

Here Reason is represented as an apothecary compounding pills of "Pleasure's smiling train" and the "family of Pain." And in the "Moral Essays," —

"Know God and Nature only are the same;
In man the judgment shoots at flying game,
A bird of passage, gone as soon as found,
Now in the moon, perhaps, now under ground."

The "judgment shooting at flying game" is an odd image enough; but I think a bird of passage, now in the moon and now under ground, could be found nowhere — out of Goldsmith's "Natural History," perhaps. An epigrammatic expression will also tempt him into saying something without basis in truth, as where he ranks together "Macedonia's madman and the Swede," and says that neither of them "looked forward farther than his nose," a slang phrase which may apply well enough to Charles XII., but certainly not to the pupil of Aristotle, who showed himself capable of a large political fore-

thought. So, too, the rhyme, if correct, is a sufficient apology for want of propriety in phrase, as where he makes "Socrates *bleed*."

But it is in his "Moral Essays" and parts of his "Satires" that Pope deserves the praise which he himself desired: —

> "Happily to steer
> From grave to gay, from lively to severe,
> Correct with spirit, eloquent with ease,
> Intent to reason, or polite to please."

Here Pope must be allowed to have established a style of his own, in which he is without a rival. One can open upon wit and epigram at any page.

> "Behold, if Fortune or a mistress frowns,
> Some plunge in business, other shave their crowns;
> To ease the soul of one oppressive weight,
> This quits an empire, that embroils a state;
> The same adust complexion has impelled,
> Charles to the convent, Philip to the field."

Indeed, I think one gets a little tired of the invariable *this* set off by the inevitable *that*, and wishes antithesis would let him have a little quiet now and then. In the first couplet, too, the conditional "frown" would have been more elegant. But taken as detached passages, how admirably the different characters are drawn, so admirably that half the verses have become proverbial. This of Addison will bear reading again: —

"Peace to all such; but were there one whose fires
True genius kindles and fair fame inspires;
Blest with each talent and each art to please,
And born to write, converse, and live with ease;
Should such a man, too fond to rule alone,
Bear like the Turk no brother near the throne,
View him with scornful yet with jealous eyes,
And hate for arts that caused himself to rise,
Damn with faint praise, assent with civil leer,
And, without sneering, teach the rest to sneer;
Willing to wound and yet afraid to strike,
Just hint a fault and hesitate dislike,
Alike reserved to blame or to commend,
A timorous foe and a suspicious friend;
Dreading e'en fools, by flatterers besieged,
And *so* obliging that he ne'er obliged;
Like Cato give his little Senate laws,
And sit attentive to his own applause,
While wits and templars every sentence raise,
And wonder with a foolish face of praise; —
Who but must laugh if such a man there be?
Who would not weep if Atticus were he?"

With the exception of the somewhat technical image in the second verse of Fame blowing the fire of genius, which too much puts us in mind of the frontispieces of the day, surely nothing better of its kind was ever written. How applicable it was to Addison I shall consider in another place. As an accurate intellectual observer and describer of personal weaknesses, Pope stands by himself in English verse.

In his epistle on the characters of women, no one who has ever known a noble woman, nay,

I should almost say no one who ever had a mother or sister, will find much to please him. The climax of his praise rather degrades than elevates.

> "O, blest in temper, whose unclouded ray
> Can make to-morrow cheerful as to-day,
> She who can love a sister's charms, or hear
> Sighs for a daughter with unwounded ear,
> She who ne'er answers till a husband cools,
> Or, if she rules him, never shows she rules,
> Charms by accepting, by submitting sways,
> Yet has her humor most when she obeys;
> Lets fops or fortune fly which way they will,
> Disdains all loss of tickets or codille,
> Spleen, vapors, or small-pox, above them all
> And mistress of herself, though china fall."

The last line is very witty and pointed, — but consider what an ideal of womanly nobleness he must have had, who praises his heroine for not being jealous of her daughter. Addison, in commending Pope's "Essay on Criticism," says, speaking of us "who live in the latter ages of the world": "We have little else to do left us but to represent the *common sense* of mankind, in more strong, more beautiful, or more uncommon lights." I think he has here touched exactly the point of Pope's merit, and, in doing so, tacitly excludes him from the position of poet, in the highest sense. Take two of Jeremy Taylor's prose sentences about the Countess of Carbery, the lady in Milton's "Comus": "The

religion of this excellent lady was of another constitution: it took root downward in humility, and brought forth fruit upward in the substantial graces of a Christian, in charity and justice, in chastity and modesty, in fair friendships and sweetness of society. . . . And though she had the greatest judgment, and the greatest experience of things and persons I ever yet knew in a person of her youth and sex and circumstances, yet, as if she knew nothing of it, she had the meanest opinion of herself, and like a fair taper, when she shined to all the room, yet round about her station she had cast a shadow and a cloud, and she shined to everybody but herself." *This* is poetry, though not in verse. The plays of the elder dramatists are not without examples of weak and vile women, but they are not without noble ones either. Take these verses of Chapman, for example: —

"Let no man value at a little price
A virtuous woman's counsel: her winged spirit
Is feathered oftentimes with noble words
And, like her beauty, ravishing and pure;
The weaker body, still the stronger soul.
O, what a treasure is a virtuous wife,
Discreet and loving. Not one gift on earth
Makes a man's life so nighly bound to heaven.
She gives him double forces to endure
And to enjoy, being one with him,
Feeling his joys and griefs with equal sense:
If he fetch sighs, she draws her breath as short;

If he lament, she melts herself in tears;
If he be glad, she triumphs; if he stir,
She moves his way, in all things his sweet ape,
Himself divinely varied without change.
All store without her leaves a man but poor,
And with her poverty is exceeding store."

Pope in the characters I have read was drawing his ideal woman, for he says at the end that she shall be his muse. The sentiments are those of a *bourgeois* and of the back parlor, more than of the poet and the muse's bower. A man's mind is known by the company it keeps.

Now it is very possible that the women of Pope's time were as bad as they could be; but if God made poets for anything, it was to keep alive the traditions of the pure, the holy, and the beautiful. I grant the influence of the age, but there is a sense in which the poet is of no age, and Beauty, driven from every other home, will never be an outcast and a wanderer, while there is a poet's nature left, will never fail of the tribute at least of a song. It seems to me that Pope had a sense of the neat rather than of the beautiful. His nature delighted more in detecting the blemish than in enjoying the charm.

However great his merit in expression, I think it impossible that a true poet could have written such a satire as the "Dunciad," which is even nastier than it is witty. It is filthy even in a filthy age, and Swift himself could not have

gone beyond some parts of it. One's mind needs to be sprinkled with some disinfecting fluid after reading it. I do not remember that any other poet ever made poverty a crime. And it is wholly without discrimination. De Foe is set in the pillory forever; and George Wither, the author of that charming poem, "Fair Virtue," classed among the dunces. And was it not in this age that loose Dick Steele paid his wife the finest compliment ever paid to woman, when he said "that to love her was a liberal education"?

Even in the "Rape of the Lock," the fancy is that of a wit rather than of a poet. It might not be just to compare his Sylphs with the Fairies of Shakespeare; but contrast the kind of fancy shown in the poem with that of Drayton's "Nymphidia," for example. I will give one stanza of it, describing the palace of the Fairy:

> "The walls of spiders' legs were made,
> Well mortised, and finely laid
> (He was the master of his trade
> It curiously that builded):
> The windows of the eyes of cats,
> And, for the roof, instead of slats
> 'T is covered with the skins of bats,
> With moonshine that are gilded."

In the last line the eye and fancy of a poet are recognized.

Personally we know more about Pope than about any of our poets. He kept no secrets

about himself. If he did not let the cat out of the bag, he always contrived to give her tail a wrench so that we might know she was there. In spite of the savageness of his satires, his natural disposition seems to have been an amiable one, and his character as an author was as purely factitious as his style. Dr. Johnson appears to have suspected his sincerity; but artifice more than insincerity lay at the basis of his character. I think that there was very little real malice in him, and that his "evil was wrought from want of thought." When Dennis was old and poor, he wrote a prologue for a play to be acted for his benefit. Except Addison, he numbered among his friends the most illustrious men of his time.

The correspondence of Pope is, on the whole, less interesting than that of any other eminent English poet, except that of Southey, and their letters have the same fault of being labored compositions. Southey's are, on the whole, the more agreeable of the two, for they inspire one (as Pope's certainly do not) with a sincere respect for the character of the writer. Pope's are altogether too full of the proclamation of his own virtues to be pleasant reading. It is plain that they were mostly addressed to the public, perhaps even to posterity. But letters, however carefully drilled to be circumspect, are sure to blab, and those of Pope leave in the reader's mind an unpleasant feeling of circumspection, —

of an attempt to look as an eminent literary character should rather than as the man really was. They have the unnatural constraint of a man in full dress sitting for his portrait and endeavoring to look his best. We never catch him, if he can help it, at unawares. Among all Pope's correspondents, Swift shows in the most dignified and, one is tempted to say, the most amiable light. It is creditable to the Dean that the letters which Pope addressed to him are by far the most simple and straightforward of any that he wrote. No sham could encounter those terrible eyes in Dublin without wincing. I think, on the whole, that a revision of judgment would substitute "discomforting consciousness of the public" for "insincerity" in judging Pope's character by his letters. He could not shake off the habits of the author, and never, or almost never, in prose, acquired that knack of seeming carelessness that makes Walpole's elaborate compositions such agreeable reading. Pope would seem to have kept a commonplace book of phrases proper to this or that occasion; and he transfers a compliment, a fine moral sentiment, nay, even sometimes a burst of passionate ardor, from one correspondent to another, with the most cold-blooded impartiality. Were it not for this curious economy of his, no one could read his letters to Lady Wortley Montagu without a conviction that they were written by a lover.

Indeed, I think nothing short of the *spretae injuria formae* will account for (though it will not excuse) the savage vindictiveness he felt and showed towards her. It may be suspected also that the bitterness of caste added gall to his resentment. His enemy wore that impenetrable armor of superior rank which rendered her indifference to his shafts the more provoking that it was unaffected. Even for us his satire loses its sting when we reflect that it is not in human nature for a woman to have had two such utterly irreconcilable characters as those of Lady Mary before and after her quarrel with the poet. In any view of Pope's conduct in this affair, there is an ill savor in his attempting to degrade a woman whom he had once made sacred with his love. Spenser touches the right chord when he says of the Rosalinde who had rejected him,

> "Not, then, to her, that scornéd thing so base,
> But to myself the blame, that lookt so high;
> Yet so much grace let her vouchsafe to grant
> To simple swain, sith her I may not love,
> Yet that I may her honor paravant
> And praise her worth, though far my wit above;
> Such grace shall be some guerdon of the grief
> And long affliction which I have endured."

In his correspondence with Aaron Hill, Pope, pushed to the wall, appears positively mean. He vainly endeavors to show that his personalities had all been written in the interests of

literature and morality, and from no selfish motive. But it is hard to believe that Theobald would have been deemed worthy of his disgustful preëminence but for the manifest superiority of his edition of Shakespeare, or that Addison would have been so adroitly disfigured unless through wounded self-love. It is easy to conceive the resentful shame which Pope must have felt when Addison so almost contemptuously disavowed all complicity in his volunteer defence of "Cato" in a brutal assault on Dennis. Pope had done a mean thing to propitiate a man whose critical judgment he dreaded; and the great man, instead of thanking him, had resented his interference as impertinent. In the whole portrait of Atticus one cannot help feeling that Pope's satire is not founded on knowledge, but rather on what his own sensitive suspicion divined of the opinions of one whose expressed preferences in poetry implied a condemnation of the very grounds of the satirist's own popularity. We shall not so easily give up the purest and most dignified figure of that somewhat vulgar generation, who ranks with Sidney and Spenser as one of the few perfect gentlemen in our literary annals. A man who could command the unswerving loyalty of honest and impulsive Dick Steele could not have been a coward or a backbiter. The only justification alleged by Pope was of the flimsiest kind, namely, that Addison

regretted the introduction of the Sylphs in the second edition of the "Rape of the Lock," saying that the poem was *merum sal* before. Let any one ask himself how he likes an author's emendations of any poem to which his ear had adapted itself in its former shape, and he will hardly think it needful to charge Addison with any mean motive for his conservatism in this matter. One or two of Pope's letters are so good as to make us regret that he did not oftener don the dressing-gown and slippers in his correspondence. One in particular, to Lord Burlington, describing a journey on horseback to Oxford with Lintot the bookseller, is full of a lightsome humor worthy of Cowper, almost worthy of Gray.

Joseph Warton, in summing up at the end of his essay on the genius and writings of Pope, says that the largest part of his works "is of the *didactic*, *moral*, and *satiric;* and, consequently, not of the most *poetic* species of *poetry;* whence it is manifest that *good sense* and *judgment* were his characteristical excellences rather than *fancy* and *invention*." It is plain that in any strict definition there can be only one kind of poetry, and that what Warton really meant to say was that Pope was not a poet at all. This, I think, is shown by what Johnson says in his "Life of Pope," though he does not name Warton. The dispute on this point went on with occasional lulls for more than a half century after

Warton's death. It was renewed with peculiar acrimony when the Rev. W. L. Bowles diffused and confused Warton's critical opinions in his own peculiarly helpless way in editing a new edition of Pope in 1806. Bowles entirely mistook the functions of an editor, and maladroitly entangled his judgment of the poetry with his estimate of the author's character.[1] Thirteen years later, Campbell, in his "Specimens," controverted Mr. Bowles's estimate of Pope's character and position, both as man and poet. Mr. Bowles replied in a letter to Campbell on what he called "the invariable principles of poetry." This letter was in turn somewhat sharply criticised by Gilchrist in the "Quarterly Review." Mr. Bowles made an angry and unmannerly retort, among other things charging Gilchrist with the crime of being a tradesman's son, whereupon the affair became what they call on the frontier a free fight, in which Gilchrist, Roscoe, the elder Disraeli, and Byron took part with equal relish, though with various fortune. The last shot, in what had grown into a thirty years' war, between

[1] Bowles's *Sonnets*, well-nigh forgotten now, did more than his controversial writings for the cause he advocated. Their influence upon the coming generation was great (greater than we can well account for) and beneficial. Coleridge tells us that he made forty copies of them while at Christ's Hospital. Wordsworth's prefaces first made imagination the true test of poetry, in its more modern sense. But they drew little notice till later.

the partisans of what was called the Old School of poetry and those of the New, was fired by Bowles in 1826. Bowles, in losing his temper, lost also what little logic he had, and though, in a vague way, æsthetically right, contrived always to be argumentatively wrong. Anger made worse confusion in a brain never very clear, and he had neither the scholarship nor the critical faculty for a vigorous exposition of his own thesis. Never was wilder hitting than his, and he laid himself open to dreadful punishment, especially from Byron, whose two letters are masterpieces of polemic prose. Bowles most happily exemplified in his own pamphlets what was really the turning-point of the whole controversy (though all the combatants more or less lost sight of it or never saw it), namely, that without clearness and terseness there could be no good writing, whether in prose or verse; in other words that, while precision of phrase presupposes lucidity of thought, yet good writing is an art as well as a gift. Byron alone saw clearly that here was the true knot of the question, though, as his object was mainly mischief, he was not careful to loosen it. The sincerity of Byron's admiration of Pope has been, it seems to me, too hastily doubted. What he admired in him was that patience in careful finish which he felt to be wanting in himself and in most of his contemporaries. Pope's assailants went so far as to

make a defect of what, rightly considered, was a distinguished merit, though the amount of it was exaggerated. The weak point in the case was that his nicety concerned itself wholly about the phrase, leaving the thought to be as faulty as it would, and that it seldom extended beyond the couplet, often not beyond a single verse. His serious poetry, therefore, at its best, is a succession of loosely strung epigrams, and no poet more often than he makes the second line of the couplet a mere train-bearer to the first. His more ambitious works may be defined as careless thinking carefully versified. Lessing was one of the first to see this, and accordingly he tells us that "his great, I will not say greatest, merit lay in what we call the mechanic of poetry." [1] Lessing, with his usual insight, parenthetically qualifies his statement; for where Pope, as in the "Rape of the Lock," found a subject exactly level with his genius, he was able to make what, taken for all in all, is the most perfect poem in the language.

It will hardly be questioned that the man who writes what is still piquant and remembrable, a century and a quarter after his death, was a man of genius. But there are two modes of uttering such things as cleave to the memory

[1] *Briefe die neueste Litteratur betreffend*, 1759, ii. Brief. See also his more elaborate criticism of the *Essay on Man* (*Pope ein Metaphysiker*), 1755.

of mankind. They may be said or sung. I do not think that Pope's verse anywhere sings, but it should seem that the abiding presence of fancy in his best work forbids his exclusion from the rank of poet. The atmosphere in which he habitually dwelt was an essentially prosaic one, the language habitual to him was that of conversation and society, so that he lacked the help of that fresher dialect which seems like inspiration in the elder poets. His range of associations was of that narrow kind which is always vulgar, whether it be found in the village or the court. Certainly he has not the force and majesty of Dryden in his better moods, but he has a grace, a finesse, an art of being pungent, a sensitiveness to impressions, that would incline us to rank him with Voltaire (whom in many ways he so much resembles), as an author with whom the gift of writing was primary, and that of verse secondary. No other poet that I remember ever wrote prose which is so purely prose as his; and yet, in any impartial criticism, the "Rape of the Lock" sets him even as a poet far above many men more largely endowed with poetic feeling and insight than he.

A great deal must be allowed to Pope for the age in which he lived, and not a little, I think, for the influence of Swift. In his own province he still stands unapproachably alone. If to be the greatest satirist of individual men, rather

than of human nature, if to be the highest expression which the life of the court and the ball-room has ever found in verse, if to have added more phrases to our language than any other but Shakespeare, if to have charmed four generations, make a man a great poet, — then he is one. He was the chief founder of an artificial style of writing, which in his hands was living and powerful, because he used it to express artificial modes of thinking and an artificial state of society. Measured by any high standard of imagination, he will be found wanting; tried by any test of wit, he is unrivalled.

WORDSWORTH

1875

A GENERATION has now passed away since Wordsworth was laid with the family in the churchyard at Grasmere.[1] Perhaps it is hardly yet time to take a perfectly impartial measure of his value as a poet. To do this is especially hard for those who are old enough to remember the last shot which the foe was sullenly firing in that long war of critics which began when he published his manifesto as Pretender, and which came to a pause rather than to an end when they flung up their caps with the rest at his final coronation. Something of the intensity of the *odium theologicum* (if indeed the *aestheticum* be not in these days the more bitter of the two) entered into the conflict. The Wordsworthians were a sect, who, if they had the enthusiasm, had also not a little of the

[1] "I pay many little visits to the family in the churchyard at Grasmere," writes James Dixon (an old servant of Wordsworth) to Crabb Robinson, with a simple, one might almost say canine pathos, thirteen years after his wife's death. Wordsworth was always considerate and kind with his servants, Robinson tells us.

exclusiveness and partiality to which sects are liable. The verses of the master had for them the virtue of religious canticles stimulant of zeal and not amenable to the ordinary tests of cold-blooded criticism. Like the hymns of the Huguenots and Covenanters, they were songs of battle no less than of worship, and the combined ardors of conviction and conflict lent them a fire that was not naturally their own. As we read them now, that virtue of the moment is gone out of them, and whatever of Dr. Wattsiness there is gives us a slight shock of disenchantment. It is something like the difference between the "Marseillaise" sung by armed propagandists on the edge of battle, or by Brissotins in the tumbrel, and the words of it read coolly in the closet, or recited with the factitious frenzy of Thérèse. It was natural in the early days of Wordsworth's career to dwell most fondly on those profounder qualities to appreciate which settled in some sort the measure of a man's right to judge of poetry at all. But now we must admit the shortcomings, the failures, the defects as no less essential elements in forming a sound judgment as to whether the seer and artist were so united in him as to justify the claim first put in by himself and afterwards maintained by his sect to a place beside the few great poets who exalt men's minds, and give a right direction and safe outlet to their passions through the imagination,

while insensibly helping them toward balance of character and serenity of judgment by stimulating their sense of proportion, form, and the nice adjustment of means to ends. In none of our poets has the constant propulsion of an unbending will, and the concentration of exclusive, if I must not say somewhat narrow, sympathies done so much to make the original endowment of Nature effective, and in none accordingly does the biography throw so much light on the works, or enter so largely into their composition as an element whether of power or of weakness. Wordsworth never saw, and I think never wished to see, beyond the limits of his own consciousness and experience. He early conceived himself to be, and through life was confirmed by circumstances in the faith that he was, a "dedicated spirit," [1] a state of mind likely to further an intense but at the same time one-sided development of the intellectual powers. The solitude in which the greater part of his mature life was passed, while it doubtless ministered to the passionate intensity of his musings upon man and Nature, was, it may be suspected,

[1] In the *Prelude* he attributes this consecration to a sunrise seen (during a college vacation) as he walked homeward from some village festival where he had danced all night: —

> "My heart was full; I made no vows, but vows
> Were then made for me; bond unknown to me
> Was given that I should be, else sinning greatly,
> A dedicated Spirit." (Bk. IV.)

harmful to him as an artist, by depriving him of any standard of proportion outside himself by which to test the comparative value of his thoughts, and by rendering him more and more incapable of that urbanity of mind which could be gained only by commerce with men more nearly on his own level, and which gives tone without lessening individuality. Wordsworth never quite saw the distinction between the eccentric and the original. For what we call originality seems not so much anything peculiar, much less anything odd, but that quality in a man which touches human nature at most points of its circumference, which reinvigorates the consciousness of our own powers by recalling and confirming our own unvalued sensations and perceptions, gives classic shape to our own amorphous imaginings, and adequate utterance to our own stammering conceptions or emotions. The poet's office is to be a Voice, not of one crying in the wilderness to a knot of already magnetized acolytes, but singing amid the throng of men, and lifting their common aspirations and sympathies (so first clearly revealed to themselves) on the wings of his song to a purer ether and a wider reach of view. We cannot, if we would, read the poetry of Wordsworth as mere poetry; at every other page we find ourselves entangled in a problem of æsthetics. The world-old question of matter and form,

of whether nectar *is* of precisely the same flavor when served to us from a Grecian chalice or from any jug of ruder pottery, comes up for decision anew. The Teutonic nature has always shown a sturdy preference of the solid bone with a marrow of nutritious moral to any shadow of the same on the flowing mirror of sense. Wordsworth never lets us long forget the deeply rooted stock from which he sprang, — *vien ben dà lui.*

. . . . . .

The true rank of Wordsworth among poets is, perhaps, not even yet to be fairly estimated, so hard is it to escape into the quiet hall of judgment uninflamed by the tumult of partisanship which besets the doors.

Coming to manhood, predetermined to be a great poet, at a time when the artificial school of poetry was enthroned with all the authority of long succession and undisputed legitimacy, it was almost inevitable that Wordsworth, who, both by nature and judgment, was a rebel against the existing order, should become a partisan. Unfortunately, he became not only the partisan of a system, but of William Wordsworth as its representative. Right in general principle, he thus necessarily became wrong in particulars.

Justly convinced that greatness only achieves its ends by implicitly obeying its own instincts, he perhaps reduced the following his instincts too much to a system, mistook his own resentments for the promptings of his natural genius, and, compelling principle to the measure of his own temperament or even of the controversial exigency of the moment, fell sometimes into the error of making naturalness itself artificial. If a poet resolve to be original, it will end commonly in his being merely peculiar.

Wordsworth himself departed more and more in practice, as he grew older, from the theories which he had laid down in his prefaces; but those theories undoubtedly had a great effect in retarding the growth of his fame. He had carefully constructed a pair of spectacles through which his earlier poems were to be studied, and the public insisted on looking through them at his mature works, and were consequently unable to see fairly what required a different focus. He forced his readers to come to his poetry with a certain amount of conscious preparation, and thus gave them beforehand the impression of something like mechanical artifice, and deprived them of the contented repose of implicit faith. To the child a watch seems to be a living creature; but Wordsworth would not let his readers be children, and did injustice to himself by giving them an uneasy doubt whether creations

which really throbbed with the very heart's-blood of genius, and were alive with Nature's life of life, were not contrivances of wheels and springs. A naturalness which we are told to expect has lost the crowning grace of Nature. The men who walked in Cornelius Agrippa's visionary gardens had probably no more pleasurable emotion than that of a shallow wonder, or an equally shallow self-satisfaction in thinking they had hit upon the secret of the thaumaturgy; but to a tree that has grown as God willed we come without a theory and with no botanical predilections, enjoying it simply and thankfully; or the Imagination re-creates for us its past summers and winters, the birds that have nested and sung in it, the sheep that have clustered in its shade, the winds that have visited it, the cloudbergs that have drifted over it, and the snows that have ermined it in winter. The Imagination is a faculty that flouts at foreordination, and Wordsworth seemed to do all he could to cheat his readers of her company by laying out paths with a peremptory *Do not step off the gravel!* at the opening of each, and preparing pitfalls for every conceivable emotion, with guide-boards to tell each when and where it must be caught.

But if these things stood in the way of immediate appreciation, he had another theory which interferes more seriously with the total and permanent effect of his poems. He was

theoretically determined not only to be a philosophic poet, but to be a *great* philosophic poet, and to this end he must produce an epic. Leaving aside the question whether the epic be obsolete or not, it may be doubted whether the history of a single man's mind is universal enough in its interest to furnish all the requirements of the epic machinery, and it may be more than doubted whether a poet's philosophy be ordinary metaphysics, divisible into chapter and section. It is rather something which is more energetic in a word than in a whole treatise, and our hearts unclose themselves instinctively at its simple *Open sesame!* while they would stand firm against the reading of the whole body of philosophy. In point of fact, the one element of greatness which "The Excursion" possesses indisputably is heaviness. It is only the episodes that are universally read, and the effect of these is diluted by the connecting and accompanying lectures on metaphysics. Wordsworth had his epic mould to fill, and, like Benvenuto Cellini in casting his Perseus, was forced to throw in everything, debasing the metal lest it should run short. Separated from the rest, the episodes are perfect poems in their kind, and without example in the language.

Wordsworth, like most solitary men of strong minds, was a good critic of the substance of poetry, but somewhat niggardly in the allow-

ance he made for those subsidiary qualities which make it the charmer of leisure and the employment of minds without definite object. It may be doubted, indeed, whether he set much store by any contemporary writing but his own, and whether he did not look upon poetry too exclusively as an exercise rather of the intellect than as a nepenthe of the imagination.[1] He says of himself, speaking of his youth:—

> "In fine,
> I was a better judge of thoughts than words,
> Misled in estimating words, not only
> By common inexperience of youth,
> But by the trade in classic niceties,
> The dangerous craft of culling term and phrase
> From languages that want the living voice
> To carry meaning to the natural heart;
> To tell us what is passion, what is truth,
> What reason, what simplicity and sense."[2]

Though he here speaks in the preterite tense, this was always true of him, and his thought seems often to lean upon a word too weak to bear its weight. No reader of adequate insight can help regretting that he did not earlier give himself to "the trade of classic niceties." It was precisely this which gives to the blank verse of Landor the severe dignity and reserved force which alone among later poets recall the tune

[1] According to Landor, he pronounced all Scott's poetry to be "not worth five shillings."

[2] *Prelude*, bk. IV.

of Milton, and to which Wordsworth never attained. Indeed, Wordsworth's blank verse (though the passion be profounder) is always essentially that of Cowper. They were alike also in their love of outward nature and of simple things. The main difference between them is one of scenery rather than of sentiment, between the lifelong familiar of the mountains and the dweller on the plain.

It cannot be denied that in Wordsworth the very highest powers of the poetic mind were associated with a certain tendency to the diffuse and commonplace. It is in the understanding (always prosaic) that the great golden veins of his imagination are embedded.[1] He wrote too much to write always well; for it is not a great Xerxes army of words, but a compact Greek ten thousand, that march safely down to posterity. He set tasks to his divine faculty, which is much the same as trying to make Jove's eagle do the service of a clucking hen. Throughout "The Prelude" and "The Excursion" he seems

[1] This was instinctively felt, even by his admirers. Miss Martineau said to Crabb Robinson in 1839, speaking of Wordsworth's conversation: "Sometimes he is annoying from the pertinacity with which he dwells on trifles; at other times he flows on in the utmost grandeur, leaving a strong impression of inspiration." Robinson tells us that he read *Resolution and Independence* to a lady who was affected by it even to tears, and then said, "I have not heard anything for years that so much delighted me; but, *after all, it is not poetry.*"

striving to bind the wizard Imagination with the sand-ropes of dry disquisition, and to have forgotten the potent spell-word which would make the particles cohere. There is an arenaceous quality in the style which makes progress wearisome. Yet with what splendors as of mountain sunsets are we rewarded! what golden rounds of verse do we not see stretching heavenward with angels ascending and descending! what haunting harmonies hover around us deep and eternal like the undying barytone of the sea! and if we are compelled to fare through sands and desert wildernesses, how often do we not hear airy shapes that syllable our names with a startling personal appeal to our highest consciousness and our noblest aspiration, such as we wait for in vain in any other poet! Landor, in a letter to Miss Holford, says admirably of him, "Common minds alone can be ignorant what breadth of philosophy, what energy and intensity of thought, what insight into the heart, and what observation of Nature are requisite for the production of such poetry."

Take from Wordsworth all which an honest criticism cannot but allow, and what is left will show how truly great he was. He had no humor, no dramatic power, and his temperament was of that dry and juiceless quality, that in all his published correspondence you shall not find a letter, but only essays. If we consider care-

fully where he was most successful, we shall find that it was not so much in description of natural scenery, or delineation of character, as in vivid expression of the effect produced by external objects and events upon his own mind, and of the shape and hue (perhaps momentary) which they in turn took from his mood or temperament. His finest passages are always monologues. He had a fondness for particulars, and there are parts of his poems which remind us of local histories in the undue relative importance given to trivial matters. He was the historian of Wordsworthshire. This power of particularization (for it is as truly a power as generalization) is what gives such vigor and greatness to single lines and sentiments of Wordsworth, and to poems developing a single thought or sentiment. It was this that made him so fond of the sonnet. That sequestered nook forced upon him the limits which his fecundity (if I may not say his garrulity) was never self-denying enough to impose on itself. It suits his solitary and meditative temper, and it was there that Lamb (an admirable judge of what was permanent in literature) liked him best. Its narrow bounds, but fourteen paces from end to end, turn into a virtue his too common fault of giving undue prominence to every passing emotion. He excels in monologue, and the law of the sonnet tempers monologue with mercy.

In "The Excursion" we are driven to the subterfuge of a French verdict of extenuating circumstances. His mind had not that reach and elemental movement of Milton's, which, like the trade-wind, gathered to itself thoughts and images like stately fleets from every quarter; some deep with silks and spicery, some brooding over the silent thunders of their battailous armaments, but all swept forward in their destined track, over the long billows of his verse, every inch of canvas strained by the unifying breath of their common epic impulse. It was an organ that Milton mastered, mighty in compass, capable equally of the trumpet's ardors or the slim delicacy of the flute, and sometimes it bursts forth in great crashes through his prose, as if he touched it for solace in the intervals of his toil. If Wordsworth sometimes put the trumpet to his lips, yet he lays it aside soon and willingly for his appropriate instrument, the pastoral reed. And it is not one that grew by any vulgar stream, but that which Apollo breathed through, tending the flocks of Admetus, — that which Pan endowed with every melody of the visible universe, — the same in which the soul of the despairing nymph took refuge and gifted with her dual nature, — so that ever and anon, amid the notes of human joy or sorrow, there comes suddenly a deeper and almost awful tone, thrilling us into dim consciousness of a forgotten divinity.

Wordsworth's absolute want of humor, while it no doubt confirmed his self-confidence by making him insensible both to the comical incongruity into which he was often led by his earlier theory concerning the language of poetry and to the not unnatural ridicule called forth by it, seems to have been indicative of a certain dulness of perception in other directions.[1] We

[1] Nowhere is this displayed with more comic self-complacency than when he thought it needful to rewrite the ballad of *Helen of Kirconnel*, — a poem hardly to be matched in any language for swiftness of movement and savage sincerity of feeling. Its shuddering compression is masterly.

> "Curst be the heart that thought the thought,
> And curst the hand that fired the shot,
> When in my arms burd Helen dropt,
> That died to succor me!
>
> "O, think ye not my heart was sair
> When my love dropt down and spake na mair?"

Compare this with —

> "Proud Gordon cannot bear the thoughts
> That through his brain are travelling,
> And, starting up, to Bruce's heart
> He launched a deadly javelin;
>
> Fair Ellen saw it when it came,
> And, *stepping forth to meet the same*,
> Did with her body cover
> The Youth, her chosen lover.
> . . . . . .
> And Bruce (*as soon as he had slain*
> *The Gordon*) sailed away to Spain,
> And fought with rage incessant
> Against the Moorish Crescent."

These are surely the verses of an attorney's clerk "penning a stanza when he should engross." It will be noticed that

cannot help feeling that the material of his nature was essentially prose, which, in his inspired moments, he had the power of transmuting, but which, whenever the inspiration failed or was factitious, remained obstinately leaden. The normal condition of many poets would seem to approach that temperature to which Wordsworth's mind could be raised only by the white heat of profoundly inward passion. And in proportion to the intensity needful to make his

Wordsworth here also departs from his earlier theory of the language of poetry by substituting a javelin for a bullet as less modern and familiar. Had he written —

> "And Gordon never gave a hint,
> But, having somewhat picked his flint,
> Let fly the fatal bullet
> That killed that lovely pullet,"—

it would hardly have seemed more like a parody than the rest. He shows the same insensibility in a note upon the *Ancient Mariner* in the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads:* "The poem of my friend has indeed great defects; first, that the principal person has no distinct character, either in his profession of mariner, or as a human being who, having been long under the control of supernatural impressions, might be supposed himself to partake of something supernatural; secondly, that he does not act, but is continually acted upon; thirdly, that the events, having no necessary connection, do not produce each other; and lastly, that the imagery is somewhat laboriously accumulated." Here is an indictment, to be sure, and drawn, plainly enough, by the attorney's clerk aforenamed. One would think that the strange charm of Coleridge's most truly original poems lay in this very emancipation from the laws of cause and effect.

nature thoroughly aglow is the very high quality of his best verses. They seem rather the productions of Nature than of man, and have the lastingness of such, delighting our age with the same startle of newness and beauty that pleased our youth. Is it his thought? It has the shifting inward lustre of diamond. Is it his feeling? It is as delicate as the impressions of fossil ferns. He seems to have caught and fixed forever in immutable grace the most evanescent and intangible of our intuitions, the very ripple-marks on the remotest shores of being. But this intensity of mood which insures high quality is by its very nature incapable of prolongation, and Wordsworth, in endeavoring it, falls more below himself, and is, more even than many poets his inferiors in imaginative quality, a poet of passages. Indeed, one cannot help having the feeling sometimes that the poem is there for the sake of these passages, rather than that these are the natural jets and elations of a mind energized by the rapidity of its own motion. In other words, the happy couplet or gracious image seems not to spring from the inspiration of the poem conceived as a whole, but rather to have dropped of itself into the mind of the poet in one of his rambles, who then, in a less rapt mood, has patiently built up around it a setting of verse too often ungraceful in form and of a material whose cheapness may cast a doubt on

the priceless quality of the gem it encumbers.[1] During the most happily productive period of his life, Wordsworth was impatient of what may be called the mechanical portion of his art. His wife and sister seem from the first to have been his scribes. In later years, he had learned and often insisted on the truth that poetry was an art no less than a gift, and corrected his poems in cold blood, sometimes to their detriment. But he certainly had more of the vision than of the faculty divine, and was always a little numb on the side of form and proportion. Perhaps his best poem in these respects is the "Laodamia," and it is not uninstructive to learn from his own lips that "it cost him more trouble than almost anything of equal length he had ever written." His longer poems (miscalled epical) have no more intimate bond of union than their more or less immediate relation to his own personality. Of character other than his own he had but a faint conception, and all the personages of "The Excursion" that are not Wordsworth are the merest shadows of himself upon mist, for his self-concentrated

[1] "A hundred times when, roving high and low,
I have been harassed with the toil of verse,
Much pains and little progress, and at once
Some lovely Image in the song rose up,
Full-formed, like Venus rising from the sea."
Prelude, bk. IV.

nature was incapable of projecting itself into the consciousness of other men and seeing the springs of action at their source in the recesses of individual character. The best parts of these longer poems are bursts of impassioned soliloquy, and his fingers were always clumsy at the *callida junctura*. The stream of narration is sluggish, if varied by times with pleasing reflections (*viridesque placido aequore sylvas*); we are forced to do our own rowing, and only when the current is hemmed in by some narrow gorge of the poet's personal consciousness do we feel ourselves snatched along on the smooth but impetuous rush of unmistakable inspiration. The fact that what is precious in Wordsworth's poetry was (more truly even than with some greater poets than he) a gift rather than an achievement should always be borne in mind in taking the measure of his power. I know not whether to call it height or depth, this peculiarity of his, but it certainly endows those parts of his work which we should distinguish as Wordsworthian with an unexpectedness and impressiveness of originality such as we feel in the presence of Nature herself. He seems to have been half conscious of this, and recited his own poems to all comers with an enthusiasm of wondering admiration that would have been profoundly comic[1] but for its simple sincerity and for the

[1] Mr. Emerson tells us that he was at first tempted to smile,

fact that William Wordsworth, Esquire, of Rydal Mount, was one person, and the William Wordsworth whom he so heartily reverenced quite another. We recognize two voices in him, as Stephano did in Caliban. There are Jeremiah and his scribe Baruch. If the prophet cease from dictating, the amanuensis, rather than be idle, employs his pen in jotting down some anecdotes of his master, how he one day went out and saw an old woman, and the next day did *not*, and so came home and dictated some verses on this ominous phenomenon, and how another day he saw a cow. These marginal annotations have been carelessly taken up into the text, have been religiously held by the pious to be orthodox scripture, and by dexterous exegesis have been made to yield deeply oracular meanings. Presently the real prophet takes up the word again and speaks as one divinely inspired, the Voice of a higher and invisible power. Wordsworth's better utterances have the bare sincerity, the absolute abstraction from time and place, the immunity from decay, that belong to the grand simplicities of the Bible. They seem not more his own than ours and every man's, the word

and Mr. Ellis Yarnall (who saw him in his eightieth year) says, "These quotations [from his own works] he read in a way that much impressed me; it seemed almost as if he were *awed by the greatness of his own power, the gifts with which he had been endowed.*" (The italics are mine.)

of the inalterable Mind. This gift of his was naturally very much a matter of temperament, and accordingly by far the greater part of his finer product belongs to the period of his prime, ere Time had set his lumpish foot on the pedal that deadens the nerves of animal sensibility.[1] He did not grow as those poets do in whom the artistic sense is predominant. One of the most delightful fancies of the Genevese humorist, Toepffer, is the poet Albert, who, having had his portrait drawn by a highly idealizing hand, does his best afterwards to look like it. Many of Wordsworth's later poems seem like rather unsuccessful efforts to resemble his former self. They would never, as Sir John Harrington says

[1] His best poetry was written when he was under the immediate influence of Coleridge. Coleridge seems to have felt this, for it is evidently to Wordsworth that he alludes when he speaks of "those who have been so well pleased that I should, year after year, flow with a hundred nameless rills into *their* main stream." (*Letters, Conversations, and Recollections of S. T. C.*, vol. i. pp. 5, 6.) "Wordsworth found fault with the repetition of the concluding sound of the participles in Shakespeare's line about bees: —

"'The singing masons building roofs of gold.'

This, he said, was a line that Milton never would have written. Keats thought, on the other hand, that the repetition was in harmony with the continued note of the singers." (Leigh Hunt's *Autobiography*.) Wordsworth writes to Crabb Robinson in 1837, "My ear is susceptible to the clashing of sounds almost to disease." One cannot help thinking that his training in these niceties was begun by Coleridge.

of poetry, "keep a child from play and an old man from the chimney-corner." [1]

Chief Justice Marshall once blandly interrupted a junior counsel who was arguing certain obvious points of law at needless length, by saying, "Brother Jones, there are *some* things which a Supreme Court of the United States sitting in equity may be presumed to know." Wordsworth has this fault of enforcing and restating obvious points till the reader feels as if his own intelligence were somewhat underrated. He is overconscientious in giving us full measure, and once profoundly absorbed in the sound of his own voice, he knows not when to stop. If he feel himself flagging, he has a droll way of keeping the floor, as it were, by asking himself a series of questions sometimes not needing, and often incapable of answer. There are three stanzas of such near the close of the First Part of "Peter Bell," where Peter first catches a glimpse of the dead body in the water, all happily incongruous, and ending with one which reaches the height of comicality: —

> "Is it a fiend that to a stake
> Of fire his desperate self is tethering?
> Or stubborn spirit doomed to yell,
> In solitary ward or cell,
> Ten thousand miles from all his brethren?"

The same want of humor which made him

[1] In the Preface to his translation of the *Orlando Furioso*.

insensible to incongruity may perhaps account also for the singular unconsciousness of disproportion which so often strikes us in his poetry. For example, a little farther on in "Peter Bell" we find: —

> "*Now* — like a tempest-shattered bark
> That overwhelmed and prostrate lies,
> And in a moment to the verge
> Is lifted of a foaming surge —
> Full suddenly the Ass doth rise!"

And one cannot help thinking that the similes of the huge stone, the sea-beast, and the cloud, noble as they are in themselves, are somewhat too lofty for the service to which they are put.[1]

The movement of Wordsworth's mind was too slow and his mood too meditative for narrative poetry. He values his own thoughts and reflections too much to sacrifice the least of them to the interests of his story. Moreover, it is never action that interests him, but the subtle motives that lead to or hinder it. "The Waggoner" involuntarily suggests a comparison with "Tam O'Shanter" infinitely to its own disadvantage. "Peter Bell," full though it be of profound touches and subtle analysis, is lumbering and disjointed. Even Lamb was forced to confess that he did not like it. "The White Doe," the most Wordsworthian of them all in the best meaning of the epithet, is also only the more

[1] In *Resolution and Independence.*

truly so for being diffuse and reluctant. What charms in Wordsworth and will charm forever is the

> "Happy tone
> Of meditation slipping in between
> The beauty coming and the beauty gone."

A few poets, in the exquisite adaptation of their words to the tune of our own feelings and fancies, in the charm of their manner, indefinable as the sympathetic grace of woman, *are* everything to us without our being able to say that they are much in themselves. They rather narcotize than fortify. Wordsworth must subject our mood to his own before he admits us to his intimacy; but, once admitted, it is for life, and we find ourselves in his debt, not for what he has been to us in our hours of relaxation, but for what he has done for us as a reinforcement of faltering purpose and personal independence of character. His system of a Nature-cure, first professed by Dr. Jean Jacques and continued by Cowper, certainly breaks down as a whole. The Solitary of "The Excursion," who has not been cured of his scepticism by living among the medicinal mountains, is, so far as we can see, equally proof against the lectures of Pedler and Parson. Wordsworth apparently felt that this would be so, and accordingly never saw his way clear to finishing the poem. But the treatment, whether a panacea or not, is certainly whole-

some, inasmuch as it inculcates abstinence, exercise, and uncontaminate air. I am not sure, indeed, that the Nature-cure theory does not tend to foster in constitutions less vigorous than Wordsworth's what Milton would call a fugitive and cloistered virtue at a dear expense of manlier qualities. The ancients and our own Elizabethans, ere spiritual megrims had become fashionable, perhaps made more out of life by taking a frank delight in its action and passion and by grappling with the facts of this world, rather than muddling themselves over the insoluble problems of another. If they had not discovered the picturesque, as we understand it, they found surprisingly fine scenery in man and his destiny, and would have seen something ludicrous, it may be suspected, in the spectacle of a grown man running to hide his head in the apron of the Mighty Mother whenever he had an ache in his finger or got a bruise in the tussle for existence.

But when, as I have said, our impartiality has made all those qualifications and deductions against which even the greatest poet may not plead his privilege, what is left to Wordsworth is enough to justify his fame. Even where his genius is wrapped in clouds, the unconquerable lightning of imagination struggles through, flashing out unexpected vistas, and illuminating the humdrum pathway of our daily thought with a

radiance of momentary consciousness that seems like a revelation. If it be the most delightful function of the poet to set our lives to music, yet perhaps he will be even more sure of our maturer gratitude if he do his part also as moralist and philosopher to purify and enlighten; if he define and encourage our vacillating perceptions of duty; if he piece together our fragmentary apprehensions of our own life and that larger life whose unconscious instruments we are, making of the jumbled bits of our dissected map of experience a coherent chart. In the great poets there is an exquisite sensibility both of soul and sense that sympathizes like gossamer sea-moss with every movement of the element in which it floats, but which is rooted on the solid rock of our common sympathies. Wordsworth shows less of this finer feminine fibre of organization than one or two of his contemporaries, notably than Coleridge or Shelley; but he was a masculine thinker, and in his more characteristic poems there is always a kernel of firm conclusion from far-reaching principles that stimulates thought and challenges meditation. Groping in the dark passages of life, we come upon some axiom of his, as it were a wall that gives us our bearings and enables us to find an outlet. Compared with Goethe we feel that he lacks that serene impartiality of mind which results from breadth of culture; nay, he seems

narrow, insular, almost provincial. He reminds us of those saints of Dante who gather brightness by revolving on their own axis. But through this very limitation of range he gains perhaps in intensity and the impressiveness which results from eagerness of personal conviction. If we read Wordsworth through, as I have just done, we find ourselves changing our mind about him at every other page, so uneven is he. If we read our favorite poems or passages only, he will seem uniformly great. And even as regards "The Excursion" we should remember how few long poems will bear consecutive reading. For my part I know of but one, — the "Odyssey."

None of our great poets can be called popular in any exact sense of the word, for the highest poetry deals with thoughts and emotions which inhabit, like rarest sea-mosses, the doubtful limits of that shore between our abiding divine and our fluctuating human nature, rooted in the one, but living in the other, seldom laid bare, and otherwise visible only at exceptional moments of entire calm and clearness. Of no other poet except Shakespeare have so many phrases become household words as of Wordsworth. If Pope has made current more epigrams of worldly wisdom, to Wordsworth belongs the nobler praise of having defined for us, and given us for a daily possession, those faint and vague suggestions of other-worldliness of whose gentle

ministry with our baser nature the hurry and bustle of life scarcely ever allowed us to be conscious. He has won for himself a secure immortality by a depth of intuition which makes only the best minds at their best hours worthy, or indeed capable, of his companionship, and by a homely sincerity of human sympathy which reaches the humblest heart. Our language owes him gratitude for the habitual purity and abstinence of his style, and we who speak it, for having emboldened us to take delight in simple things, and to trust ourselves to our own instincts. And he hath his reward. It needs not to bid

> "Renowned Spenser, lie a thought more nigh
> To learned Chaucer, and rare Beaumond lie
> A little nearer Spenser";—

for there is no fear of crowding in that little society with whom he is now enrolled as fifth in the succession of the great English Poets.

CARLYLE[1]

1866

A FEELING of comical sadness is likely to come over the mind of any middle-aged man who sets himself to recollecting the names of different authors that have been famous, and the number of contemporary immortalities whose end he has seen since coming to manhood. Many a light, hailed by too careless observers as a fixed star, has proved to be only a short-lived lantern at the tail of a newspaper kite. The literary heaven which our youth saw dotted thick with rival glories, we find now to have been a stage-sky merely, artificially enkindled from behind; and the cynical daylight which is sure to follow all theatrical enthusiasms shows us ragged holes where once were luminaries, sheer vacancy instead of lustre. Our earthly reputations, says a great poet, are the color of grass, and the same sun that makes the green bleaches it out again. But next morning is not the time to criticise the scene-painter's firmament, nor is it quite fair to examine coldly a part of some general illusion in the absence

[1] Apropos of his *Frederick the Great*.

of that sympathetic enthusiasm, that self-surrender of the fancy, which made it what it was. It would not be safe for all neglected authors to comfort themselves in Wordsworth's fashion, inferring genius in an inverse proportion to public favor, and a high and solitary merit from the world's indifference. On the contrary, it would be more just to argue from popularity a certain amount of real value, though it may not be of that permanent quality which insures enduring fame. The contemporary world and Wordsworth were both half right. He undoubtedly owned and worked the richest vein of his period; but he offered to his contemporaries a heap of gold-bearing quartz where the baser mineral made the greater show, and the purchaser must do his own crushing and smelting, with no guaranty but the bare word of the miner. It was not enough that certain bolder adventurers should now and then show a nugget in proof of the success of their venture. The gold of the poet must be refined, moulded, stamped with the image and superscription of his time, but with a beauty of design and finish that are of no time. The work must surpass the material. Wordsworth was wholly void of that shaping imagination which is the highest criterion of a poet.

Immediate popularity and lasting fame, then, would seem to be the result of different quali-

ties, and not of mere difference in degree. It is safe to prophesy a certain durability of recognition for any author who gives evidence of intellectual force, in whatever kind, above the average amount. There are names in literary history which are only names; and the works associated with them, like acts of Congress already agreed on in debate, are read by their titles and passed. What is it that insures what may be called living fame, so that a book shall be at once famous and read? What is it that relegates divine Cowley to that remote, uncivil Pontus of the British Poets, and keeps garrulous Pepys within the cheery circle of the evening lamp and fire? Originality, eloquence, sense, imagination, not one of them is enough by itself, but only in some happy mixture and proportion. Imagination seems to possess in itself more of the antiseptic property than any other single quality; but, without less showy and more substantial allies, it can at best give only deathlessness, without the perpetual youth that makes it other than dreary. It were easy to find examples of this Tithonus immortality, setting its victims apart from both gods and men; helpless duration, undying, to be sure, but sapless and voiceless also, and long ago deserted by the fickle Hemera. And yet chance could confer that gift on Glaucus, which love and the consent of Zeus failed to secure for the

darling of the Dawn. Is it mere luck, then? Luck may, and often does, have some share in ephemeral successes, as in a gambler's winnings spent as soon as got, but not in any lasting triumph over time. Solid success must be based on solid qualities and the honest culture of them.

The first element of contemporary popularity is undoubtedly the power of entertaining. If a man have anything to tell, the world cannot be called upon to listen to him unless he have perfected himself in the best way of telling it. People are not to be argued into a pleasurable sensation, nor is taste to be compelled by any syllogism, however stringent. An author may make himself very popular, however, and even justly so, by appealing to the passion of the moment, without having anything in him that shall outlast the public whim which he satisfies. Churchill is a remarkable example of this. He had a surprising extemporary vigor of mind; his phrase carries great weight of blow; he undoubtedly surpassed all contemporaries, as Cowper says of him, in a certain rude and earth-born vigor; but his verse is dust and ashes now, solemnly inurned, of course, in the Chalmers columbarium, and without danger of violation. His brawn and muscle are fading traditions, while the fragile, shivering genius of Cowper is still a good life on the books of the Critical Insurance Office. "It is not, then, loftiness of

mind that puts one by the side of Virgil?" cries poor old Cavalcanti at his wits' end. Certainly not altogether that. There must be also the great Mantuan's art; his power, not only of being strong in parts, but of making those parts coherent in an harmonious whole, and tributary to it. Gray, if we may believe the commentators, has not an idea, scarcely an epithet, that he can call his own; and yet he is, in the best sense, one of the classics of English literature. He had exquisite felicity of choice; his dictionary had no vulgar word in it, no harsh one, but all culled from the luckiest moods of poets, and with a faint but delicious aroma of association; he had a perfect sense of sound, and one idea without which all the poetic outfit (*si absit prudentia*) is of little avail, — that of combination and arrangement, in short, of art. The poets from whom he helped himself have no more claim to any of his poems as wholes than the various beauties of Greece (if the old story were true) to the Venus of the artist.

Imagination, as we have said, has more virtue to keep a book alive than any other single faculty. Burke is rescued from the usual doom of orators, because his learning, his experience, his sagacity are rimmed with a halo by this bewitching light behind the intellectual eye from the highest heaven of the brain. Shakespeare has impregnated his common sense with the

steady glow of it, and answers the mood of youth and age, of high and low, immortal as that dateless substance of the soul he wrought in. To have any chance of lasting, a book must satisfy, not merely some fleeting fancy of the day, but a constant longing and hunger of human nature; and it needs only a superficial study of literature to be convinced that real fame depends rather on the sum of an author's powers than on any brilliancy of special parts. There must be wisdom as well as wit, sense no less than imagination, judgment in equal measure with fancy, and the fiery rocket must be bound fast to the poor wooden stick that gives it guidance if it would mount and draw all eyes. There are some who think that the brooding patience which a great work calls for belonged exclusively to an earlier period than ours. Others lay the blame on our fashion of periodical publication, which necessitates a sensation and a crisis in every number, and forces the writer to strive for startling effects, instead of that general lowness of tone which is the last achievement of the artist. The simplicity of antique passion, the homeliness of antique pathos, seems not merely to be gone out of fashion, but out of being as well. Modern poets appear rather to tease their words into a fury than to infuse them with the deliberate heats of their matured conception, and strive to replace the rapture of the mind with a fervid intensity

of phrase. Our reaction from the decorous platitudes of the last century has no doubt led us to excuse this, and to be thankful for something like real fire, though of stubble; but our prevailing style of criticism, which regards parts rather than wholes, which dwells on the beauty of passages, and, above all, must have its languid nerves pricked with the expected sensation at whatever cost, has done all it could to confirm us in our evil way. Passages are good when they lead to something, when they are necessary parts of the building, but they are not good to dwell in. This taste for the startling reminds us of something which happened once at the burning of a country meeting-house. The building stood on a hill, and, apart from any other considerations, the fire was as picturesque as could be desired. When all was a black heap, licking itself here and there with tongues of fire, there rushed up a farmer gasping anxiously, "Hez the bell fell yit?" An ordinary fire was no more to him than that on his hearthstone; even the burning of a meeting-house, in itself a vulcanic rarity, could not (so long as he was of another parish) tickle his outworn palate; but he had hoped for a certain *tang* in the downcome of the bell that might recall the boyish flavor of conflagration. There was something dramatic, no doubt, in this surprise of the brazen sentinel at his post, but the breathless rustic has always

seemed to me a type of the prevailing delusion in æsthetics. Alas ! if the bell must fall in every stanza or every monthly number, how shall an author contrive to stir us at last, unless with whole Moscows, crowned with the tintinnabulary crash of the Kremlin? For myself I am glad to feel that I am still able to find contentment in the more conversational and domestic tone of my old-fashioned wood-fire. No doubt a great part of our pleasure in reading is unexpectedness, whether in turn of thought or of phrase ; but an emphasis out of place, an intensity of expression not founded on sincerity of moral or intellectual conviction, reminds one of the underscorings in young ladies' letters, a wonder even to themselves under the colder north light of matronage. It is the part of the critic, however, to keep cool under whatever circumstances, and to reckon that the excesses of an author will be at first more attractive to the many than that average power which shall win him attention with a new generation of men. It is seldom found out by the majority, till after a considerable interval, that he was the original man who contrived to be simply natural, — the hardest lesson in the school of art and the latest learned, if, indeed, it be a thing capable of acquisition at all. The most winsome and wayward of brooks draws now and then some lover's foot to its intimate reserve, while

the spirt of a bursting water-pipe gathers a gaping crowd forthwith.

Mr. Carlyle is an author who has now been so long before the world that we may feel toward him something of the unprejudice of posterity. It has long been evident that he had no more ideas to bestow upon us, and that no new turn of his kaleidoscope would give us anything but some variation of arrangement in the brilliant colors of his style. It is perhaps possible, then, to arrive at some not wholly inadequate estimate of his place as a writer, and especially of the value of the ideas whose advocate he makes himself, with a bitterness and violence that increase, as it seems to me, in proportion as his inward conviction of their truth diminishes.

The leading characteristics of an author who is in any sense original, that is to say, who does not merely reproduce, but modifies the influence of tradition, culture, and contemporary thought upon himself by some admixture of his own, may commonly be traced more or less clearly in his earliest works. This is more strictly true, no doubt, of poets, because the imagination is a fixed quantity, not to be increased by any amount of study and reflection. Skill, wisdom, and even wit are cumulative; but that diviner faculty, which is the spiritual eye, though it may be trained and sharpened, cannot be added to by taking thought. This has always been

something innate, unaccountable, to be laid to a happy conjunction of the stars. Goethe, the last of the *great* poets, accordingly takes pains to tell us under what planets he was born; and in him it is curious how uniform the imaginative quality is from the beginning to the end of his long literary activity. His early poems show maturity, his mature ones a youthful freshness. The apple already lies potentially in the blossom, as that may be traced also by cutting across the ripened fruit. With a mere change of emphasis, Goethe might be called an old boy at both ends of his career.

In the earliest authorship of Mr. Carlyle we find some not obscure hints of the future man. Nearly fifty years ago he contributed a few literary and critical articles to the Edinburgh Encyclopædia. The outward fashion of them is that of the period; but they are distinguished by a certain security of judgment remarkable at any time, remarkable especially in one so young. British criticism has been always more or less parochial; has never, indeed, quite freed itself from sectarian cant and planted itself honestly on the æsthetic point of view. It cannot quite persuade itself that truth is of immortal essence, totally independent of all assistance from quarterly journals or the British army and navy. Carlyle, in these first essays, already shows the influence of his master, Goethe, the most widely

receptive of critics. In a compact notice of Montaigne, there is not a word as to his religious scepticism. The character is looked at purely from its human and literary sides. As illustrating the bent of the author's mind, the following passage is most to our purpose: "A modern reader will not easily cavil at the patient and good-natured, though exuberant egotism which brings back to our view 'the form and pressure' of a time long past. *The habits and humors, the mode of acting and thinking, which characterized a Gascon gentleman in the sixteenth century, cannot fail to amuse an inquirer of the nineteenth; while the faithful delineation of human feelings, in all their strength and weakness, will serve as a mirror to every mind capable of self-examination.*" We find here no uncertain indication of that eye for the moral picturesque, and that sympathetic appreciation of character, which within the next few years were to make Carlyle the first in insight of English critics and the most vivid of English historians. In all his earlier writing he never loses sight of his master's great rule, *Den Gegenstand fest zu halten.* He accordingly gave to Englishmen the first humanly possible likeness of Voltaire, Diderot, Mirabeau, and others, who had hitherto been measured by the usual British standard of their respect for the geognosy of Moses and the historic credibility of the Books of Chronicles. What was the real meaning of this phenomenon?

what the amount of this man's honest performance in the world? and in what does he show that family likeness, common to all the sons of Adam, which gives us a fair hope of being able to comprehend him? These were the questions which Carlyle seems to have set himself honestly to answer in the critical writings which fill the first period of his life as a man of letters. In this mood he rescued poor Boswell from the unmerited obloquy of an ungrateful generation, and taught us to see something half-comically beautiful in the poor, weak creature, with his pathetic instinct of reverence for what was nobler, wiser, and stronger than himself. Everything that Mr. Carlyle wrote during this first period thrills with the purest appreciation of whatever is brave and beautiful in human nature, with the most vehement scorn of cowardly compromise with things base; and yet, immitigable as his demand for the highest in us seems to be, there is always something reassuring in the humorous sympathy with mortal frailty which softens condemnation and consoles for shortcoming. The remarkable feature of Mr. Carlyle's criticism (see, for example, his analysis and exposition of Goethe's "Helena") is the sleuth-hound instinct with which he presses on to the *matter* of his theme, — never turned aside by a false scent, regardless of the outward beauty of form, sometimes almost contemptuous of it, in his hunger after

the intellectual nourishment which it may hide. The delicate skeleton of admirably articulated and related parts which underlies and sustains every true work of art, and keeps it from sinking on itself a shapeless heap, he would crush remorselessly to come at the marrow of meaning. With him the ideal sense is secondary to the ethical and metaphysical, and he has but a faint conception of their possible unity.

By degrees the humorous element in his nature gains ground, till it overmasters all the rest. Becoming always more boisterous and obtrusive, it ends at last, as such humor must, in cynicism. In "Sartor Resartus" it is still kindly, still infused with sentiment; and the book, with its mixture of indignation and farce, strikes one as might the prophecies of Jeremiah, if the marginal comments of the Rev. Mr. Sterne in his wildest mood had by some accident been incorporated with the text. In "Sartor" the marked influence of Jean Paul is undeniable, both in matter and manner. It is curious for one who studies the action and reaction of national literatures on each other, to see the humor of Swift and Sterne and Fielding, after filtering through Richter, reappear in Carlyle with a tinge of Germanism that makes it novel, alien, or even displeasing, as the case may be, to the English mind. Unhappily the bit of *mother* from Swift's vinegar-barrel has had strength enough to sour

all the rest. The whimsicality of "Tristram Shandy," which, even in the original, has too often the effect of forethought, becomes a deliberate artifice in Richter, and at last a mere mannerism in Carlyle.

Mr. Carlyle in his critical essays had the advantage of a well-defined theme, and of limits both in the subject and in the space allowed for its treatment, which kept his natural extravagance within bounds, and compelled some sort of discretion and compactness. The great merit of these essays lay in a criticism based on wide and various study, which, careless of tradition, applied its standard to the real and not the contemporary worth of the literary or other performance to be judged, and in an unerring eye for that fleeting expression of the moral features of character, a perception of which alone makes the drawing of a coherent likeness possible. Their defect was a tendency, gaining strength with years, to confound the moral with the æsthetic standard, and to make the value of an author's work dependent on the general force of his nature rather than on its special fitness for a given task. In proportion as his humor gradually overbalanced the other qualities of his mind, his taste for the eccentric, amorphous, and violent in men became excessive, disturbing more and more his perception of the more commonplace attributes which give consistency to portraiture.

His "French Revolution" is a series of lurid pictures, unmatched for vehement power, in which the figures of such sons of earth as Mirabeau and Danton loom gigantic and terrible as in the glare of an eruption, their shadows swaying far and wide, grotesquely awful. But all is painted by eruption flashes in violent light and shade. There are no half tints, no gradations, and one finds it impossible to account for the continuance in power of less Titanic actors in the tragedy like Robespierre, on any theory whether of human nature or of individual character supplied by Mr. Carlyle. Of his success, however, in accomplishing what he aimed at, which was to haunt the mind with memories of a horrible political nightmare, there can be no doubt.

Goethe says, apparently thinking of Richter, "The worthy Germans have persuaded themselves that the essence of true humor is formlessness." Heine had not yet shown that a German might combine the most airy humor with a sense of form as delicate as Goethe's own, and that there was no need to borrow the bow of Philoctetes for all kinds of game. Mr. Carlyle's own tendency was toward the lawless, and the attraction of Jean Paul made it an overmastering one. Goethe, I think, might have gone farther, and affirmed that nothing but the highest artistic sense can prevent humor from

degenerating into the grotesque, and thence downwards to utter anarchy. Rabelais is a striking example of it. The moral purpose of his book cannot give it that unity which the instinct and forethought of art only can bring forth. Perhaps we owe the masterpiece of humorous literature to the fact that Cervantes had been trained to authorship in a school where form predominated over substance, and the most convincing proof of the supremacy of art at the highest period of Greek literature is to be found in Aristophanes. Mr. Carlyle has no artistic sense of form or rhythm, scarcely of proportion. Accordingly he looks on verse with contempt as something barbarous, — the savage ornament which a higher refinement will abolish, as it has tattooing and nose-rings. With a conceptive imagination vigorous beyond any in his generation, with a mastery of language equalled only by the greatest poets, he wants altogether the plastic imagination, the shaping faculty, which would have made him a poet in the highest sense. He is a preacher and a prophet, — anything you will, — but an artist he is not, and never can be. It is always the knots and gnarls of the oak that he admires, never the perfect and balanced tree.

It is certainly more agreeable to be grateful for what we owe an author than to blame him for what he cannot give us. But it is sometimes

the business of a critic to trace faults of style and of thought to their root in character and temperament, to show their necessary relation to, and dependence on, each other, and to find some more trustworthy explanation than mere wantonness of will for the moral obliquities of a man so largely moulded and gifted as Mr. Carlyle. So long as he was merely an exhorter or dehorter, we were thankful for such eloquence, such humor, such vivid or grotesque images, and such splendor of illustration as only he could give; but when he assumes to be a teacher of moral and political philosophy, when he himself takes to compounding the social panaceas he has made us laugh at so often, and advertises none as genuine but his own, we begin to inquire into his qualifications and his defects, and to ask ourselves whether his patent pill differ from others except in the larger amount of aloes, or have any better recommendation than the superior advertising powers of a mountebank of genius. Comparative criticism teaches us that moral and æsthetic defects are more nearly related than is commonly supposed. Had Mr. Carlyle been fitted out completely by nature as an artist, he would have had an ideal in his work which would have lifted his mind away from the muddier part of him, and trained him to the habit of seeking and seeing the harmony rather than the discord and

contradiction of things. His innate love of the picturesque (which is only another form of the sentimentalism he so scoffs at, perhaps as feeling it a weakness in himself),[1] once turned in the direction of character, and finding its chief satisfaction there, led him to look for that ideal of human nature in individual men which is but fragmentarily represented in the entire race, and is rather divined from the aspiration, forever disenchanted to be forever renewed, of the immortal part in us, than found in any example of actual achievement. A wiser temper would have seen something more consoling than disheartening in the continual failure of men eminently endowed to reach the standard of this spiritual requirement, would perhaps have found in it an inspiring hint that it is mankind, and not special men, that are to be shaped at last into the image of God, and that the endless life of the generations may hope to come nearer that goal of which the short-breathed threescore years and ten fall too unhappily short.

But Mr. Carlyle has invented the Hero-cure, and all who recommend any other method, or see any hope of healing elsewhere, are either quacks and charlatans or their victims. His

[1] Thirty years ago, when this was written, I ventured only a hint that Carlyle was essentially a sentimentalist. In what has been published since his death I find proof of what I had divined rather than definitely formulated. (1888.)

lively imagination conjures up the image of an impossible he, as contradictorily endowed as the chief personage in a modern sentimental novel, who, at all hazards, must not lead mankind like a shepherd, but bark, bite, and otherwise worry them toward the fold like a truculent sheep-dog. If Mr. Carlyle would only now and then recollect that men are men, and not sheep, nay, that the farther they are from being such, the more well grounded our hope of one day making something better of them! It is indeed strange that one who values Will so highly in the greatest should be blind to its infinite worth in the least of men; nay, that he should so often seem to confound it with its irritable and purposeless counterfeit, Wilfulness. The natural impatience of an imaginative temperament, which conceives so vividly the beauty and desirableness of a nobler manhood and a diviner political order, makes him fret at the slow moral processes by which the All-Wise brings about his ends, and turns the very foolishness of men to his praise and glory. Mr. Carlyle is for calling down fire from Heaven whenever he cannot readily lay his hand on the match-box. No doubt it is somewhat provoking that it should be so easy to build castles in the air, and so hard to find tenants for them. It is a singular intellectual phenomenon to see a man, who earlier in life so thoroughly appreciated the

innate weakness and futile tendency of the "storm and thrust" period of German literature, constantly assimilating, as he grows older, more and more nearly to its principles and practice. It is no longer the sagacious and moderate Goethe who is his type of what is highest in human nature, but far rather some Götz of the Iron Hand, some asserter of the divine legitimacy of *Faustrecht*. It is odd to conceive the fate of Mr. Carlyle under the sway of any of his heroes, how Cromwell would have scorned him as a babbler more long-winded than Prynne, but less clear and practical, how Friedrich would have scoffed at his tirades as *dummes Zeug* not to be compared with the romances of Crébillon *fils*, or possibly have clapped him in a marching regiment as a fit subject for the cane of the sergeant. Perhaps something of Mr. Carlyle's irritability is to be laid to the account of his early schoolmastership at Kirkcaldy. This great booby World is such a dull boy, and will not learn the lesson we have taken such pains in expounding for the fiftieth time. Well, then, if eloquence, if example, if the awful warning of other little boys who neglected their accidence and came to the gallows, if none of these avail, the birch at least is left, and we will try that. The dominie spirit has become every year more obtrusive and intolerant in Mr. Carlyle's writing, and the rod, instead of being kept in

its place as a resource for desperate cases, has become the alpha and omega of all successful training, the one divinely appointed means of human enlightenment and progress, in short, the final hope of that absurd animal who fancies himself a little lower than the angels. Have we feebly taken it for granted that the distinction of man was reason? Never was there a more fatal misconception. It is in the gift of unreason that we are unenviably distinguished from the brutes, whose nobler privilege of instinct saves them from our blunders and our crimes.

But since Mr. Carlyle has become possessed with the hallucination that he is head-master of this huge boys' school which we call the World, his pedagogic birch has grown to the taller proportions and more ominous aspect of a gallows. His article on Dr. Francia was a panegyric of the halter, in which the gratitude of mankind is invoked for the self-appointed dictator who had discovered in Paraguay a tree more beneficent than that which produced the Jesuits' bark. Mr. Carlyle seems to be in the condition of a man who uses stimulants, and must increase his dose from day to day as the senses become dulled under the spur. He began by admiring strength of character and purpose and the manly self-denial which makes a humble fortune great by steadfast loyalty to duty. He has gone on till mere strength has become such washy

weakness that there is no longer any titillation in it; and nothing short of downright violence will rouse his nerves now to the needed excitement. At first he made out very well with remarkable men; then, lessening the water and increasing the spirit, he took to Heroes: and now he must have downright *in*humanity, or the draught has no savor; so he gets on at last to Kings, types of remorseless Force, who maintain the political views of Berserkers by the legal principles of Lynch. Constitutional monarchy is a failure, representative government is a gabble, democracy a birth of the bottomless pit; there is no hope for mankind except in getting themselves under a good driver who shall not spare the lash. And yet, unhappily for us, these drivers are providential births not to be contrived by any cunning of ours, and Friedrich II. is hitherto the last of them. Meanwhile the world's wheels have got fairly stalled in mire and other matter of every vilest consistency and most disgustful smell. What are we to do? Mr. Carlyle will not let us make a lever with a rail from the next fence, or call in the neighbors. That would be too commonplace and cowardly, too anarchical. No; he would have us sit down beside him in the slough and shout lustily for Hercules. If that indispensable demigod will not or cannot come, we can find a useful and instructive solace, during the intervals of shouting, in a hearty

abuse of human nature, which, at the long last, is always to blame.

Since "Sartor Resartus" Mr. Carlyle has done little but repeat himself with increasing emphasis and heightened shrillness. Warning has steadily heated toward denunciation, and remonstrance soured toward scolding. The image of the Tartar prayer-mill, which he borrowed from Richter and turned to such humorous purpose, might be applied to himself. The same phrase comes round and round, only the machine, being a little crankier, rattles more, and the performer is called on for a more visible exertion. If there be not something very like cant in Mr. Carlyle's later writings, then cant is not the repetition of a creed after it has become a phrase by the cooling of that white-hot conviction which once made it both the light and warmth of the soul. I do not mean intentional and deliberate cant, but neither is that which Mr. Carlyle denounces so energetically in his fellow men of that conscious kind. I do not mean to blame him for it, but mention it rather as an interesting phenomenon of human nature. The stock of ideas which mankind has to work with is very limited, like the alphabet, and can at best have an air of freshness given it by new arrangements and combinations, or by application to new times and circumstances. Montaigne is but Ecclesiastes writing in the sixteenth century,

Voltaire but Lucian in the eighteenth. Yet both are original, and so certainly is Mr. Carlyle, whose borrowing is mainly from his own former works. But he does this so often and so openly that we may at least be sure that he ceased growing a number of years ago, and is a remarkable example of arrested development.

The cynicism, however, which has now become the prevailing temper of his mind, has gone on expanding with unhappy vigor. In Mr. Carlyle it is not, certainly, as in Swift, the result of personal disappointment, and of the fatal eye of an accomplice for the mean qualities by which power could be attained that it might be used for purposes as mean. It seems rather the natural corruption of his exuberant humor. Humor in its first analysis is a perception of the incongruous, and in its highest development, of the incongruity between the actual and the ideal in men and life. With so keen a sense of the ludicrous contrast between what men might be, nay, wish to be, and what they are, and with a vehement nature that demands the instant realization of his vision of a world altogether heroic, it is no wonder that Mr. Carlyle, always hoping for a thing and always disappointed, should become bitter. Perhaps if he expected less he would find more. Saul seeking his father's asses found himself turned suddenly into a king; but Mr. Carlyle, on the lookout for a king, always seems to

find the other sort of animal. He sees nothing on any side of him but a procession of the Lord of Misrule, in gloomier moments, a Dance of Death, where everything is either a parody of whatever is noble, or an aimless jig that stumbles at last into the annihilation of the grave, and so passes from one nothing to another. Is a world, then, which buys and reads Mr. Carlyle's works distinguished only for its "fair, large ears"? If he who has read and remembered so much would only now and then call to mind the old proverb, *Nec deus, nec lupus, sed homo!* If he would only recollect that, from the days of the first grandfather, everybody has remembered a golden age behind him! No doubt Adam depreciated the apple which the little Cain on his knee was crunching, by comparison with those he himself had tasted in Eden.

The very qualities, it seems to me, which came so near making a great poet of Mr. Carlyle, disqualify him for the office of historian. The poet's concern is with the appearances of things, with their harmony in that whole which the imagination demands for its satisfaction, and their truth to that ideal nature which is the proper object of poetry. History, unfortunately, is very far from being ideal, still farther from an exclusive interest in those heroic or typical figures which answer all the wants of the epic and the drama and fill their utmost artistic limits.

Mr. Carlyle has an unequalled power and vividness in painting detached scenes, in bringing out in their full relief the oddities or peculiarities of character; but he has a far feebler sense of those gradual changes of opinion, that strange communication of sympathy from mind to mind, that subtle influence of very subordinate actors in giving a direction to policy or action, which we are wont somewhat vaguely to call the progress of events. His scheme of history is purely an epical one, where only leading figures appear by name and are in any strict sense operative. He has no conception of the people as anything else than an element of mere brute force in political problems, and would sniff scornfully at that unpicturesque common sense of the many, which comes slowly to its conclusions, no doubt, but compels obedience even from rulers the most despotic when once its mind is made up. His history of Frederick is, of course, a Fritziad; but next to his hero, the cane of the drill-sergeant and iron ramrods appear to be the conditions which to his mind satisfactorily account for the result of the Seven Years' War. It is our opinion, which subsequent events seem to justify, that, had there not been in the Prussian people a strong instinct of nationality, Protestant nationality too, and an intimate conviction of its advantages, the war might have ended quite otherwise. Frederick II. left the machine

of war which he received from his father even more perfect than he found it, yet within a few years of his death it went to pieces before the shock of French armies animated by an idea. Again a few years, and the Prussian soldiery, inspired once more by the old national fervor, were victorious. After all, is it not moral forces that make the heaviest battalions, other things being tolerably equal? Were it not for the purely picturesque bias of Mr. Carlyle's genius, for the necessity which his epical treatment lays upon him of always having a protagonist, we should be astonished that an idealist like him should have so little faith in ideas and so much in matter.

Mr. Carlyle's manner is not so well suited to the historian as to the essayist. He is always great in single figures and striking episodes, but there is neither gradation nor continuity. He has extraordinary patience and conscientiousness in the gathering and sifting of his material, but is scornful of commonplace facts and characters, impatient of whatever will not serve for one of his clever sketches, or group well in a more elaborate figure-piece. He sees history, as it were, by flashes of lightning. A single scene, whether a landscape or an interior, a single figure or a wild mob of men, whatever may be snatched by the eye in that instant of intense illumination, is minutely photographed upon

the memory. Every tree and stone, almost every blade of grass; every article of furniture in a room; the attitude or expression, nay, the very buttons and shoe-ties of a principal figure; the gestures of momentary passion in a wild throng, — everything leaps into vision under that sudden glare with a painful distinctness that leaves the retina quivering. The intervals are absolute darkness. Mr. Carlyle makes us acquainted with the isolated spot where we happen to be when the flash comes, as if by actual eyesight, but there is no possibility of a comprehensive view. No other writer compares with him for vividness. He is himself a witness, and makes us witnesses of whatever he describes. This is genius beyond a question, and of a very rare quality, but it is not history. He has not the cold-blooded impartiality of the historian; and while he entertains us, moves us to tears or laughter, makes us the unconscious captives of his ever-changeful mood, we find that he has taught us comparatively little. His imagination is so powerful that it makes him the contemporary of his characters, and thus his history seems to be the memoirs of a cynical humorist, with hearty likes and dislikes, with something of acridity in his partialities whether for or against, more keenly sensitive to the grotesque than to the simply natural, and who enters in his diary, even of what comes within the range of his own

observation, only so much as amuses his fancy, is congenial with his humor, or feeds his prejudice. Mr. Carlyle's method is accordingly altogether pictorial, his hasty temper making narrative wearisome to him. In his "Friedrich," for example, we get very little notion of the civil administration of Prussia; and when he comes, in the last volume, to his hero's dealings with civil reforms, he confesses candidly that it would tire him too much to tell us about it, even if he knew anything at all satisfactory himself.

Mr. Carlyle's historical compositions are wonderful prose poems, full of picture, incident, humor, and character, where we grow familiar with his conception of certain leading personages, and even of subordinate ones, if they are necessary to the scene, so that they come out living upon the stage from the dreary limbo of names; but this is no more history than the historical plays of Shakespeare. There is nothing in imaginative literature superior in its own way to the episode of Voltaire in the Fritziad. It is delicious in humor, masterly in minute characterization. We feel as if the principal victim (for we cannot help feeling all the while that he is so) of this mischievous genius had been put upon the theatre before us by some perfect mimic like Foote, who had studied his habitual gait, gestures, tones, turn of thought, costume, trick of feature, and rendered them

with the slight dash of caricature needful to make the whole composition tell. It is in such things that Mr. Carlyle is beyond all rivalry, and that we must go back to Shakespeare for a comparison. But the mastery of Shakespeare is shown perhaps more strikingly in his treatment of the ordinary than of the exceptional. His is the gracious equality of Nature herself. Mr. Carlyle's gift is rather in the representation than in the evolution of character; and it is a necessity of his art, therefore, to exaggerate slightly his heroic, and to caricature in like manner his comic parts. His appreciation is less psychological than physical and external. Grimm relates that Garrick, riding once with Préville, proposed to him that they should counterfeit drunkenness. They rode through Passy accordingly, deceiving all who saw them. When beyond the town Préville asked how he had succeeded. "Excellently," said Garrick, "as to your body; but your legs were not tipsy." Mr. Carlyle would be as exact in his observation of nature as the great actor, and would make us *see* a drunken man as well; but we doubt whether he could have conceived that unmatchable scene in "Antony and Cleopatra," where the tipsiness of Lepidus pervades the whole metaphysical no less than the physical part of the triumvir. If his sympathies bore any proportion to his instinct for catching those traits which are the expression

of character, but not character itself, we might have had a great historian in him instead of a history-painter. But that which is a main element in Mr. Carlyle's talent, and does perhaps more than anything else to make it effective, is a defect of his nature. The cynicism which renders him so entertaining precludes him from any just conception of men and their motives, and from any sane estimate of the relative importance of the events which concern them. I remember a picture of Hamon's, where before a Punch's theatre are gathered the wisest of mankind in rapt attention. Socrates sits on a front bench, absorbed in the spectacle, and in the corner stands Dante making entries in his note-book. Mr. Carlyle as an historian leaves us in somewhat such a mood. The world is a puppet-show, and when we have watched the play out, we depart with a half-comic consciousness of the futility of all human enterprise, and the ludicrousness of all man's action and passion on the stage of the world. Simple, kindly, blundering Oliver Goldsmith was after all wiser, and his Vicar, ideal as Hector and not less immortal, is a demonstration of the perennial beauty and heroism of the homeliest human nature. The cynical view is congenial to certain moods, and is so little inconsistent with original nobleness of mind that it is not seldom the acetous fermentation of it; but it is the view

of the satirist, not of the historian, and takes in but a narrow arc in the circumference of truth. Cynicism in itself is essentially disagreeable. It is the intellectual analogue of the truffle; and though it may be very well in giving a relish to thought for certain palates, it cannot supply the substance of it. Mr. Carlyle's cynicism is not that high-bred weariness of the outsides of life which we find in Ecclesiastes. It goes much deeper than that to the satisfactions, not of the body or the intellect, but of the very soul as well. It vaunts itself; it is noisy and aggressive. What the wise master puts into the mouth of desperate ambition, thwarted of the fruit of its crime, as the fitting expression of passionate sophistry, seems to have become an article of his creed. With him

> . . "Life *is* a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing."

He goes about with his Diogenes dark lantern, professing to seek a man, but inwardly resolved to find a monkey. He loves to flash it suddenly on poor human nature in some ridiculous or degrading posture. He admires still, or keeps affirming that he admires, the doughty, silent, hard-working men who go honestly about their business; but when we come to his later examples, we find that it is not loyalty to

duty or to an inward ideal of high-mindedness that he finds admirable in them, but a blind unquestioning vassalage to whomsoever it has pleased him to set up for a hero. He would fain replace the old feudalism with a spiritual counterpart, in which there shall be an obligation to soul service. He who once popularized the word *flunkey* by ringing the vehement changes of his scorn upon it, is at last forced to conceive an ideal flunkeyism to squire the hectoring Don Belianises of his fancy about the world. Failing this, his latest theory of Divine government seems to be the cudgel. Poets have sung all manner of vegetable loves; Petrarch has celebrated the laurel, Chaucer the daisy, and Wordsworth the gallows-tree; it remained for the ex-pedagogue of Kirkcaldy to become the volunteer laureate of the rod and to imagine a world created and directed by a divine Dr. Busby. We cannot help thinking that Mr. Carlyle might have learned something to his advantage by living a few years in the democracy which he scoffs at as heartily *a priori* as if it were the demagogism which Aristophanes derided from experience. The hero, as Mr. Carlyle understands him, was a makeshift of the past; and the ideal of manhood is to be found hereafter in free communities, where the state shall at length sum up and exemplify in itself all those qualities which poets were forced

to imagine and typify because they could not find them in the actual world.

In the earlier part of his literary career, Mr. Carlyle was the denouncer of shams, the preacher-up of sincerity, manliness, and a living faith, instead of a droning ritual. He had intense convictions, and he made disciples. With a compass of diction unequalled by any other public performer of the time, ranging as it did from the unbookish freshness of the Scottish peasant to the most far-sought phrase of literary curiosity, with humor, pathos, and eloquence at will, it was no wonder that he found eager listeners in a world longing for a sensation, and forced to put up with the West-End gospel of "Pelham." If not a profound thinker, he had what was next best, — he felt profoundly, and his cry came out of the depths. The stern Calvinism of his early training was rekindled by his imagination to the old fervor of Wishart and Brown, and became a new phenomenon as he reproduced it subtilized by German transcendentalism and German culture. Imagination, if it lay hold of a Scotchman, possesses him in the old demoniac sense of the word, and that hard logical nature, if the Hebrew fire once get fair headway in it, burns unquenchable as an anthracite coal-mine. But to utilize these sacred heats, to employ them, as a literary man is always tempted, to keep

the domestic pot a-boiling, — is such a thing possible? Only too possible, we fear; and Mr. Carlyle is an example of it. If the languid public long for a sensation, the excitement of making one becomes also a necessity of the successful author, as the intellectual nerves grow duller and the old inspiration that came unbidden to the bare garret grows shier and shier of the comfortable parlor. As he himself said thirty years ago of Edward Irving, "Unconsciously, for the most part in deep unconsciousness, there was now the impossibility to live neglected, — to walk on the quiet paths where alone it is well with us. Singularity must henceforth succeed singularity. O foulest Circean draught, thou poison of Popular Applause! madness is in thee and death; thy end is Bedlam and the grave." Mr. Carlyle won his first successes as a kind of preacher in print. His fervor, his oddity of manner, his pugnacious paradox, drew the crowd; the truth, or, at any rate, the faith that underlay them all, brought also the fitter audience, though fewer. But the curse was upon him; he must attract, he must astonish. Thenceforth he has been forced to revamp his telling things; and the oddity, as was inevitable, has become always odder, the paradoxes more paradoxical. No very large share of truth falls to the apprehension of any one man; let him keep it sacred,

and beware of repeating it till it turn to falsehood on his lips by becoming ritual. Truth always has a bewitching savor of newness in it, and novelty at the first taste recalls that original sweetness to the tongue; but alas for him who would make the one a substitute for the other! We seem to miss of late in Mr. Carlyle the old sincerity. He has become the purely literary man, less concerned about what he says than about how he shall say it to best advantage. The Muse should be the companion, not the guide, says he whom Mr. Carlyle has pronounced "the wisest of this generation." What would be a virtue in the poet is a vice of the most fatal kind in the teacher, and, alas that we should say it! the very Draco of shams, whose code contained no penalty milder than capital for the most harmless of them, has become at last something very like a sham himself. Mr. Carlyle continues to be a voice crying in the wilderness, but no longer a voice with any earnest conviction behind it, or in a wilderness where there is other than imaginary privation. Hearing him rebuke us for being humbugs and impostors, we are inclined to answer, with the ambassador of Philip II., when his master reproached him with forgetting substance in ceremony, "Your Majesty forgets that you are only a ceremony yourself." And Mr. Carlyle's teaching, moreover, if teach-

ing we may call it, belongs to what the great German, whose disciple he is, condemned as the "literature of despair." An apostle to the Gentiles might hope for some fruit of his preaching; but of what avail an apostle who shouts his message down the mouth of the pit to poor lost souls, whom he can positively assure only that it is impossible to get out? Mr. Carlyle lights up the lanterns of his Pharos after the ship is already rolling between the tongue of the sea and the grinders of the reef. It is very brilliant, and its revolving flashes touch the crests of the breakers with an awful picturesqueness; but in so desperate a state of things, even Dr. Syntax might be pardoned for being forgetful of the picturesque. The Toryism of Scott sprang from love of the past; that of Carlyle is far more dangerously infectious, for it is logically deduced from a deep disdain of human nature.

Browning has drawn a beautiful picture of an old king sitting at the gate of his palace to judge his people in the calm sunshine of that past which never existed outside a poet's brain. It is the sweetest of waking dreams, this of absolute power and perfect wisdom in one supreme ruler; but it is as pure a creation of human want and weakness, as clear a witness of mortal limitation and incompleteness, as the shoes of swiftness, the cloak of darkness, the purse

of Fortunatus, and the *elixir vitae*. It is the natural refuge of imaginative temperaments impatient of our blunders and shortcomings, and, given a complete man, all would submit to the divine right of his despotism. But alas! to every the most fortunate human birth hobbles up that malign fairy who has been forgotten, with her fatal gift of imperfection! So far as my experience has gone, it has been the very opposite to Mr. Carlyle's. Instead of finding men disloyal to their natural leader, nothing has ever seemed to me so touching as the gladness with which they follow him, when they are sure they have found him at last. But a natural leader of the ideal type is not to be looked for *nisi dignus vindice nodus*. The Divine Forethought had been cruel in furnishing one for every petty occasion, and thus thwarting in all inferior men that priceless gift of reason, to develop which, and to make it one with free will, is the highest use of our experience on earth. Mr. Carlyle was hard bestead and very far gone in his idolatry of mere *pluck*, when he was driven to choose Friedrich as a hero. A poet, and Mr. Carlyle is nothing else, is unwise who yokes Pegasus to a prosaic theme which no force of wing can lift from the dull earth. Charlemagne would have been a wiser choice, far enough in the past for ideal treatment, more manifestly the Siegfried of Anarchy, and in his rude way the refounder

of that empire which is the ideal of despotism in the Western world.

Friedrich was doubtless a remarkable man, but surely very far below any lofty standard of heroic greatness. He was the last of the European kings who could look upon his kingdom as his private patrimony; and it was this estate of his, this piece of property, which he so obstinately and successfully defended. He had no idea of country as it was understood by an ancient Greek or Roman, as it is understood by a modern Englishman or American; and there is something almost pitiful in seeing a man of genius like Mr. Carlyle fighting painfully over again those battles of the last century which settled nothing but the continuance of the Prussian monarchy, while he saw only the "burning of a dirty chimney" in the war which a great people was waging under his very eyes for the idea of nationality and orderly magistrature, and which fixed, let us hope, forever, a boundary line on the map of history and of man's advancement toward self-conscious and responsible freedom. The true historical genius, as I conceive it, is that which can see the nobler meaning of events that are near him, as the true poet is he who detects the divine in the casual; and I somewhat suspect the depth of his insight into the past, who cannot recognize the godlike of to-day under that disguise in which it always

visits us. Shall we hint to Mr. Carlyle that a man may look on an heroic age, as well as on an heroic master, with the eyes of a valet, as misappreciative certainly, though not so ignoble?

What Schiller says of a great poet, that he must be a citizen of his age as well as of his country, may be said inversely of a great king. He should be a citizen of his country as well as of his age. Friedrich was certainly the latter in its fullest sense; whether he was, or could have been, the former, in any sense, may be doubted. The man who spoke and wrote French in preference to his mother tongue, who, dying when Goethe was already drawing toward his fortieth year, Schiller toward his thirtieth, and Lessing had been already five years in his grave, could yet see nothing but barbarism in German literature, had little of the old Teutonic fibre in his nature. The man who pronounced the "Nibelungen Lied" not worth a pinch of priming, had little conception of the power of heroic traditions in making heroic men, and especially in strengthening that instinct made up of so many indistinguishable associations which we call love of country. Charlemagne, when he caused the old songs of his people to be gathered and written down, showed a truer sense of the sources of national feeling and a deeper political insight. This want of sympathy points to the somewhat narrow limits of Friedrich's nature. In spite of

Mr. Carlyle's adroit statement of the case (and the whole book has an air of being the plea of a masterly advocate in mitigation of sentence), we feel that his hero was essentially hard, narrow, and selfish. His popularity will go for little with any one who has studied the trifling and often fabulous elements that make up that singular compound. A bluntness of speech, a shabby uniform, a frugal camp equipage, a timely familiarity, may make a man the favorite of an army or a nation, — above all, if he have the knack of success. Moreover, popularity is much more easily won from above downward, and is bought at a better bargain by kings and generals than by other men. We doubt if Friedrich would have been liked as a private person, or even as an unsuccessful king. He apparently attached very few people to himself, fewer even than his brutal old Squire Western of a father. His sister Wilhelmina is perhaps an exception. We say perhaps, for we do not know how much the heroic part he was called on to play had to do with the matter, and whether sisterly pride did not pass even with herself for sisterly affection. Moreover she was far from him; and Mr. Carlyle waves aside, in his generous fashion, some rather keen comments of hers on her brother's character when she visited Berlin after he had become king. Indeed, he is apt to deal rather contemptuously with all adverse criticism

of his hero. I sympathize with his impulse in this respect, agreeing heartily as I do in Chaucer's scorn of those who "*gladlie* demen to the baser end" in such matters. But I am not quite sure if this be a safe method with the historian. He must doubtless be the friend of his hero if he would understand him, but he must be more the friend of truth if he would understand history. Mr. Carlyle's passion for truth is intense, as befits his temper, but it is that of a lover for his mistress. He would have her all to himself, and has a lover's conviction that no one is able, or even fit, to appreciate her but himself. He does well to despise the tittle-tattle of vulgar minds, but surely should not ignore *all* testimony on the other side. For ourselves, we think it not unimportant that Goethe's friend Knebel, a man not incapable of admiration, and who had served a dozen years or so as an officer of Friedrich's guard, should have bluntly called him "the tyrant."

Mr. Carlyle's history traces the family of his hero down from its beginnings in the picturesque chiaro-scuro of the Middle Ages. It was an able and above all a *canny* house, a Scotch version of the word *able*, which implies thrift and an eye to the main chance, the said main chance or chief end of man being altogether of this world. Friedrich, inheriting this family faculty in full measure, was driven, partly by

ambition, partly by necessity, to apply it to war. He did so, with the success to be expected where a man of many expedients has the good luck to be opposed by men with few. He adds another to the many proofs that it is possible to be a great general without a spark of that divine fire which we call genius, and that good fortune in war results from the same prompt talent and unbending temper which lead to the same result in the peaceful professions. Friedrich had certainly more of the temperament of genius than Marlborough or Wellington; but not to go beyond modern instances, he does not impress us with the massive breadth of Napoleon, or attract us with the climbing ardor of Turenne. To compare him with Alexander, or Hannibal, or Cæsar, were absurd. The kingship that was in him, and which won Mr. Carlyle to be his biographer, is that of will merely, of rapid and relentless command. For organization he had a masterly talent; but he could not apply it to the arts of peace, both because he wanted experience and because the rash decision of the battle-field will not serve in matters which are governed by natural laws of growth. He seems, indeed, to have had a coarse, soldier's contempt for all civil distinction, altogether unworthy of a wise king, or even of a prudent one. He confers the title of Hofrath on the husband of a woman with whom his General Walrave is living in what Mr.

Carlyle justly calls "brutish polygamy," and this at Walrave's request, on the ground that "a general's drab ought to have a handle to her name." Mr. Carlyle murmurs in a mild parenthesis that "we rather regret this"! (Vol. iii. p. 559.) This is his usual way of treating unpleasant matters, sidling by with a deprecating shrug of the shoulders. Not that he ever wilfully suppresses anything. On the contrary, there is no greater proof of his genius than the way in which, while he seems to paint a character with all its disagreeable traits, he contrives to win our sympathy for it, nay, almost our liking. This is conspicuously true of his portrait of Friedrich's father; and that he does not succeed in making Friedrich himself attractive is a strong argument with us that the fault is in the subject and not the artist.

The book, it is said, has been comparatively unsuccessful as a literary venture. Nor do we wonder at it. It is disproportionately long, and too much made up of those descriptions of battles, to read which seems even more difficult than to have won the victory itself, more disheartening than to have suffered the defeat. To an American, also, the warfare seemed Liliputian in the presence of a conflict so much larger in its proportions and significant in its results. The interest, moreover, flags decidedly toward the close, where the reader cannot help feeling

that the author loses breath somewhat painfully under the effort of so prolonged a course. Mr. Carlyle has evidently devoted to his task a labor that may be justly called prodigious. Not only has he sifted all the German histories and memoirs, but has visited every battle-field, and describes them with an eye for country that is without rival among historians. The book is evidently an abridgment of even more abundant collections, and yet, as it stands, the matter overburdens the work. It is a bundle of lively episodes rather than a continuous narrative. In this respect it contrasts oddly with the concinnity of his own earlier "Life of Schiller." But the episodes *are* lively, the humor and pathos spring from a profound nature, the sketches of character are masterly, the seizure of every picturesque incident infallible, and the literary judgments those of a thorough scholar and critic. There is, of course, the usual amusing objurgation of Dryasdust and his rubbish-heaps, the usual assumption of omniscience, and the usual certainty of the Duchess de la Ferté being always in the right; yet I cannot help thinking that a little of Dryasdust's plodding exactness would have saved Fouquet eleven years of the imprisonment to which Mr. Carlyle condemns him, would have referred us to St. Simon rather than to Voltaire for the character of the brothers Belle-Île, and would have kept clear of a certain ludicrous

etymology of the name Antwerp, not to mention some other trifling slips of the like nature. In conclusion, after saying, as an honest critic must, that "The History of Friedrich II. called Frederick the Great" is a book to be read in with more satisfaction than to be read through, after declaring that it is open to all manner of criticism, especially in point of moral purpose and tendency, I must admit with thankfulness that it has the one prime merit of being the work of a man who has every quality of a great poet except that supreme one of rhythm, which shapes both matter and manner to harmonious proportion, and that where it is good, it is good as only genius knows how to be.

With the gift of song, Carlyle would have been the greatest of epic poets since Homer. Without it, to modulate and harmonize and bring parts into their proper relation, he is the most amorphous of humorists, the most shining avatar of whim the world has ever seen. Beginning with a hearty contempt for shams, he has come at length to believe in brute force as the only reality, and has as little sense of justice as Thackeray allowed to women. I say *brute force* because, though the theory is that this force should be directed by the supreme intellect for the time being, yet all inferior wits are treated rather as obstacles to be contemptuously shoved aside than as ancillary forces to be conciliated through

their reason. But, with all deductions, he remains the profoundest critic and the most dramatic imagination of modern times. Never was there a more striking example of that *ingenium pervidum* long ago said to be characteristic of his countrymen. His is one of the natures, rare in these latter centuries, capable of rising to a white heat; but once fairly kindled, he is like a three-decker on fire, and his shotted guns go off, as the glow reaches them, alike dangerous to friend or foe. Though he seems more and more to confound material with moral success, yet there is always something wholesome in his unswerving loyalty to reality, as he understands it. History, in the true sense, he does not and cannot write, for he looks on mankind as a herd without volition, and without moral force; but such vivid pictures of events, such living conceptions of character, we find nowhere else in prose. The figures of most historians seem like dolls stuffed with bran, whose whole substance runs out through any hole that criticism may tear in them, but Carlyle's are so real in comparison, that, if you prick them, they bleed. He seems a little wearied, here and there, in his "Friedrich," with the multiplicity of detail, and does his filling-in rather shabbily; but he still remains in his own way, like his hero, the Only, and such episodes as that of Voltaire would make the fortune of any other writer. Though not the safest of

guides in politics or practical philosophy, his value as an inspirer and awakener cannot be overestimated. It is a power which belongs only to the highest order of minds, for it is none but a divine fire that can so kindle and irradiate. The debt due him from those who listened to the teachings of his prime for revealing to them what sublime reserves of power even the humblest may find in manliness, sincerity, and self-reliance, can be paid with nothing short of reverential gratitude. As a purifier of the sources whence our intellectual inspiration is drawn, his influence has been second only to that of Wordsworth, if even to his. Indeed he has been in no fanciful sense the continuator of Wordsworth's moral teaching.

EMERSON THE LECTURER

1861–68

IT is a singular fact that Mr. Emerson is the most steadily attractive lecturer in America. Into that somewhat cold-waterish region adventurers of the sensational kind come down now and then with a splash, to become disregarded King Logs before the next season. But Mr. Emerson always draws. A lecturer now for something like a third of a century, one of the pioneers of the lecturing system, the charm of his voice, his manner, and his matter has never lost its power over his earlier hearers, and continually winds new ones in its enchanting meshes. What they do not fully understand they take on trust, and listen, saying to themselves, as the old poet of Sir Philip Sidney, —

> "A sweet, attractive, kind of grace,
> A full assurance given by looks,
> Continual comfort in a face,
> The lineaments of gospel books."

We call it a singular fact, because we Yankees are thought to be fond of the spread-eagle style, and nothing can be more remote from that than his. We are reckoned a practical folk, who

would rather hear about a new air-tight stove than about Plato; yet our favorite teacher's practicality is not in the least of the Poor Richard variety. If he have any Buncombe constituency, it is that unrealized commonwealth of philosophers which Plotinus proposed to establish; and if he were to make an almanac, his directions to farmers would be something like this: "OCTOBER: *Indian Summer;* now is the time to get in your early Vedas." What, then, is his secret? Is it not that he out-Yankees us all? that his range includes us all? that he is equally at home with the potato-disease and original sin, with pegging shoes and the Over-Soul? that, as we try all trades, so has he tried all cultures? and above all, that his mysticism gives us a counterpoise to our super-practicality?

There is no man living to whom, as a writer, so many of us feel and thankfully acknowledge so great an indebtedness for ennobling impulses, — none whom so many cannot abide. What does he mean? ask these last. Where is his system? What is the use of it all? What the deuse have we to do with Brahma? I do not propose to write an essay on Emerson at this time. I will only say that one may find grandeur and consolation in a starlit night without caring to ask what it means, save grandeur and consolation; one may like Montaigne,

as some ten generations before us have done, without thinking him so systematic as some more eminently tedious (or shall we say tediously eminent?) authors; one may think roses as good in their way as cabbages, though the latter would make a better show in the witness-box, if cross-examined as to their usefulness; and as for Brahma, why, he can take care of himself, and won't bite us at any rate.

The bother with Mr. Emerson is, that, though he writes in prose, he is essentially a poet. If you undertake to paraphrase what he says, and to reduce it to words of one syllable for infant minds, you will make as sad work of it as the good monk with his analysis of Homer in the "Epistolæ Obscurorum Virorum." We look upon him as one of the few men of genius whom our age has produced, and there needs no better proof of it than his masculine faculty of fecundating other minds. Search for his eloquence in his books and you will perchance miss it, but meanwhile you will find that it has kindled all your thoughts. For choice and pith of language he belongs to a better age than ours, and might rub shoulders with Fuller and Browne, — though he does use that abominable word *reliable*. His eye for a fine, telling phrase that will carry true is like that of a backwoodsman for a rifle; and he will dredge you up a choice word from the mud of Cotton Mather

himself. A diction at once so rich and so homely as his I know not where to match in these days of writing by the page; it is like homespun cloth-of-gold. The many cannot miss his meaning, and only the few can find it. It is the open secret of all true genius. It is wholesome to angle in those profound pools, though one be rewarded with nothing more than the leap of a fish that flashes his freckled side in the sun and as suddenly absconds in the dark and dreamy waters again. There is keen excitement, though there be no ponderable acquisition. If we carry nothing home in our baskets, there is ample gain in dilated lungs and stimulated blood. What does he mean, quotha? He means inspiring hints, a divining-rod to your deeper nature. No doubt, Emerson, like all original men, has his peculiar audience, and yet I know none that can hold a promiscuous crowd in pleased attention so long as he. As in all original men, there is something for every palate. "Would you know," says Goethe, "the ripest cherries? Ask the boys and the blackbirds."

The announcement that such a pleasure as a new course of lectures by him is coming, to people as old as I am, is something like those forebodings of spring that prepare us every year for a familiar novelty, none the less novel, when it arrives, because it is familiar. We know per-

fectly well what we are to expect from Mr. Emerson, and yet what he says always penetrates and stirs us, as is apt to be the case with genius, in a very unlooked-for fashion. Perhaps genius is one of the few things which we gladly allow to repeat itself, — one of the few that multiply rather than weaken the force of their impression by iteration? Perhaps some of us hear more than the mere words, are moved by something deeper than the thoughts? If it be so, we are quite right, for it is thirty years and more of "plain living and high thinking" that speak to us in this altogether unique lay-preacher. We have shared in the beneficence of this varied culture, this fearless impartiality in criticism and speculation, this masculine sincerity, this sweetness of nature which rather stimulates than cloys, for a generation long. If ever there was a standing testimonial to the cumulative power and value of Character (and we need it sadly in these days), we have it in this gracious and dignified presence. What an antiseptic is a pure life! At sixty-five (or two years beyond his grand climacteric, as he would prefer to call it) he has that privilege of soul which abolishes the calendar, and presents him to us always the unwasted contemporary of his own prime. I do not know if he seem old to his younger hearers, but we who have known him so long wonder at the tenacity with which

he maintains himself even in the outposts of youth. I suppose it is not the Emerson of 1868 to whom we listen. For us the whole life of the man is distilled in the clear drop of every sentence, and behind each word we divine the force of a noble character, the weight of a large capital of thinking and being. We do not go to hear what Emerson says so much as to hear Emerson. Not that we perceive any falling-off in anything that ever was essential to the charm of Mr. Emerson's peculiar style of thought or phrase. The first lecture, to be sure, was more disjointed even than common. It was as if, after vainly trying to get his paragraphs into sequence and order, he had at last tried the desperate expedient of *shuffling* them. It was chaos come again, but it was a chaos full of shooting-stars, a jumble of creative forces. The second lecture, on "Criticism and Poetry," was quite up to the level of old times, full of that power of strangely subtle association whose indirect approaches startle the mind into almost painful attention, of those flashes of mutual understanding between speaker and hearer that are gone ere one can say it lightens. The vice of Emerson's criticism seems to be, that while no man is so sensitive to what is poetical, few men are less sensible than he of what makes a poem. He values the solid meaning of thought above the subtler meaning of style.

He would prefer Donne, I suspect, to Spenser, and sometimes mistakes the queer for the original.

To be young is surely the best, if the most precarious, gift of life; yet there are some of us who would hardly consent to be young again, if it were at the cost of our recollection of Mr. Emerson's first lectures during the consulate of Van Buren. We used to walk in from the country to the Masonic Temple (I think it was), through the crisp winter night, and listen to that thrilling voice of his, so charged with subtle meaning and subtle music, as shipwrecked men on a raft to the hail of a ship that came with unhoped-for food and rescue. Cynics might say what they liked. Did our own imaginations transfigure dry remainder-biscuit into ambrosia? At any rate, he brought us *life*, which, on the whole, is no bad thing. Was it all transcendentalism? magic-lantern pictures on mist? As you will. Those, then, were just what we wanted. But it was not so. The delight and the benefit were that he put us in communication with a larger style of thought, sharpened our wits with a more pungent phrase, gave us ravishing glimpses of an ideal under the dry husk of our New England; made us conscious of the supreme and everlasting originality of whatever bit of soul might be in any of us; freed us, in short, from the stocks of

prose in which we had sat so long that we had grown well-nigh contented in our cramps. And who that saw the audience will ever forget it, where every one still capable of fire, or longing to renew in himself the half-forgotten sense of it, was gathered? Those faces, young and old, agleam with pale intellectual light, eager with pleased attention, flash upon me once more from the deep recesses of the years with an exquisite pathos. Ah, beautiful young eyes, brimming with love and hope, wholly vanished now in that other world we call the Past, or peering doubtfully through the pensive gloaming of memory, your light impoverishes these cheaper days! I hear again that rustle of sensation, as they turned to exchange glances over some pithier thought, some keener flash of that humor which always played about the horizon of his mind like heat-lightning, and it seems now like the sad whisper of the autumn leaves that are whirling around me. But would my picture be complete if I forgot that ample and vegete countenance of Mr. R —— of W ——, — how, from its regular post at the corner of the front bench, it turned in ruddy triumph to the profaner audience as if he were the inexplicably appointed fugleman of appreciation? I was reminded of him by those hearty cherubs in Titian's Assumption that look at you as who should say, "Did you ever see a Madonna

like *that?* Did you ever behold one hundred and fifty pounds of womanhood mount heavenward before like a rocket?"

To some of us that long-past experience remains as the most marvellous and fruitful we have ever had. Emerson awakened us, saved us from the body of this death. It is the sound of the trumpet that the young soul longs for, careless what breath may fill it. Sidney heard it in the ballad of "Chevy Chase," and we in Emerson. Nor did it blow retreat, but called to us with assurance of victory. Did they say he was disconnected? So were the stars, that seemed larger to our eyes, still keen with that excitement, as we walked homeward with prouder stride over the creaking snow. And were *they* not knit together by a higher logic than our mere sense could master? Were we enthusiasts? I hope and believe we were, and am thankful to the man who made us worth something for once in our lives. If asked what was left? what we carried home? we should not have been careful for an answer. It would have been enough if we had said that something beautiful had passed that way. Or we might have asked in return what one brought away from a symphony of Beethoven? Enough that he had set that ferment of wholesome discontent at work in us. There is one, at least, of those old hearers, so many of whom are now in the

fruition of that intellectual beauty of which Emerson gave them both the desire and the foretaste, who will always love to repeat: —

> "Che in la mente m' è fitta, ed or m' accuora
> La cara e buona immagine paterna
> Di voi, quando nel mondo ad ora ad ora
> M' insegnavaste come l' uom s' eterna."

I am unconsciously thinking, as I write, of the third lecture of the present course, in which Mr. Emerson gave some delightful reminiscences of the intellectual influences in whose movement he had shared. It was like hearing Goethe read some passages of the "Wahrheit aus seinem Leben." Not that there was not a little *Dichtung*, too, here and there, as the lecturer built up so lofty a pedestal under certain figures as to lift them into a prominence of obscurity, and seem to masthead them there. Everybody was asking his neighbor who this or that recondite great man was, in the faint hope that somebody might once have heard of him. There are those who call Mr. Emerson cold. Let them revise their judgment in presence of this loyalty of his that can keep warm for half a century, that never forgets a friendship, or fails to pay even a fancied obligation to the uttermost farthing. This substantiation of shadows was but incidental, and pleasantly characteristic of the man to those who know and love him. The greater part of the lecture

was devoted to reminiscences of things substantial in themselves. He spoke of Everett, fresh from Greece and Germany; of Channing; of the translations of Margaret Fuller, Ripley, and Dwight; of the "Dial" and Brook Farm. To what he said of the latter an undertone of good-humored irony gave special zest. But what every one of his hearers felt was that the protagonist in the drama was left out. The lecturer was no Æneas to babble the *quorum magna pars fui*, and, as one of his listeners, I cannot help wishing to say how each of them was commenting the story as it went along, and filling up the necessary gaps in it from his own private store of memories. His younger hearers could not know how much they owed to the benign impersonality, the quiet scorn of everything ignoble, the never-sated hunger of self-culture, that were personified in the man before them. But the older knew how much the country's intellectual emancipation was due to the stimulus of his teaching and example, how constantly he had kept burning the beacon of an ideal life above our lower region of turmoil. To him more than to all other causes together did the young martyrs of our civil war owe the sustaining strength of thoughtful heroism that is so touching in every record of their lives. Those who are grateful to Mr. Emerson, as many of us are, for what they feel to be most valuable

in their culture, or perhaps I should say their impulse, are grateful not so much for any direct teachings of his as for that inspiring lift which only genius can give, and without which all doctrine is chaff.

This was something like the *caret* which some of us older boys wished to fill up on the margin of the master's lecture. Few men have been so much to so many, and through so large a range of aptitudes and temperaments, and this simply because all of us value manhood beyond any or all other qualities of character. We may suspect in him, here and there, a certain thinness and vagueness of quality, but let the waters go over him as they list, this masculine fibre of his will keep its lively color and its toughness of texture. I have heard some great speakers and some accomplished orators, but never any that so moved and persuaded men as he. There is a kind of undertow in that rich baritone of his that sweeps our minds from their foothold into deeper waters with a drift we cannot and would not resist. And how artfully (for Emerson is a long-studied artist in these things) does the deliberate utterance, that seems waiting for the fit word, appear to admit us partners in the labor of thought and make us feel as if the glance of humor were a sudden suggestion, as if the perfect phrase lying written there on the desk were as unexpected to him as to us! In

that closely filed speech of his at the Burns centenary dinner, every word seemed to have just dropped down to him from the clouds. He looked far away over the heads of his hearers, with a vague kind of expectation, as into some private heaven of invention, and the winged period came at last obedient to his spell. "My dainty Ariel!" he seemed murmuring to himself as he cast down his eyes as if in deprecation of the frenzy of approval and caught another sentence from the Sibylline leaves that lay before him, ambushed behind a dish of fruit and seen only by nearest neighbors. Every sentence brought down the house, as I never saw one brought down before, — and it is not so easy to hit Scotsmen with a sentiment that has no hint of native brogue in it. I watched, for it was an interesting study, how the quick sympathy ran flashing from face to face down the long tables, like an electric spark thrilling as it went, and then exploded in a thunder of plaudits. I watched till tables and faces vanished, for I, too, found myself caught up in the common enthusiasm, and my excited fancy set me under the *bema* listening to him who fulmined over Greece. I can never help applying to him what Ben Jonson said of Bacon: "There happened in my time one noble speaker, who was full of gravity in his speaking. His language was nobly censorious. No

man ever spake more neatly, more pressly, more weightily, or suffered less emptiness, less idleness, in what he uttered. No member of his speech but consisted of his own graces. His hearers could not cough, or look aside from him, without loss. He commanded where he spoke." Those who heard him while their natures were yet plastic, and their mental nerves trembled under the slightest breath of divine air, will never cease to feel and say: —

> "Was never eye did see that face,
> Was never ear did hear that tongue,
> Was never mind did mind his grace,
> That ever thought the travail long;
> But eyes, and ears, and every thought,
> Were with his sweet perfections caught."

THOREAU

1865

WHAT contemporary, if he was in the fighting period of his life (since Nature sets limits about her conscription for spiritual fields, as the state does in physical warfare), will ever forget what was somewhat vaguely called the "Transcendental Movement" of thirty years ago? Apparently set astir by Carlyle's essays on the Signs of the Times, and on History, the final and more immediate impulse seemed to be given by "Sartor Resartus." At least the republication in Boston of that wonderful Abraham à Sancta Clara sermon on Falstaff's text of the miserable forked radish gave the signal for a sudden mental and moral mutiny. *Ecce nunc tempus acceptabile!* was shouted on all hands with every variety of emphasis, and by voices of every conceivable pitch, representing the three sexes of men, women, and Lady Mary Wortley Montagues. The nameless eagle of the tree Ygdrasil was about to sit at last, and wild-eyed enthusiasts rushed from all sides, each eager to thrust under the mystic bird that chalk egg from which the new

and fairer Creation was to be hatched in due time. *Redeunt Saturnia regna*,— so far was certain, though in what shape, or by what methods, was still a matter of debate. Every possible form of intellectual and physical dyspepsia brought forth its gospel. Bran had its prophets, and the presartorial simplicity of Adam its martyrs, tailored impromptu from the tar-pot by incensed neighbors, and sent forth to illustrate the "feathered Mercury," as defined by Webster and Worcester. Plainness of speech was carried to a pitch that would have taken away the breath of George Fox; and even swearing had its evangelists, who answered a simple inquiry after their health with an elaborate ingenuity of imprecation that might have been honorably mentioned by Marlborough in general orders. Everybody had a mission (with a capital M) to attend to everybody else's business. No brain but had its private maggot, which must have found pitiably short commons sometimes. Not a few impecunious zealots abjured the use of money (unless earned by other people), professing to live on the internal revenues of the spirit. Some had an assurance of instant millennium so soon as hooks and eyes should be substituted for buttons. Communities were established where everything was to be common but common sense. Men renounced their old gods, and hesitated only whether to bestow their furloughed allegiance

on Thor or Budh. Conventions were held for every hitherto inconceivable purpose. The belated gift of tongues, as among the Fifth Monarchy men, spread like a contagion, rendering its victims incomprehensible to all Christian men; whether equally so to the most distant possible heathen or not was unexperimented, though many would have subscribed liberally that a fair trial might be made. It was the pentecost of Shinar. The day of utterances reproduced the day of rebuses and anagrams, and there was nothing so simple that uncial letters and the style of Diphilus the Labyrinth could not turn it into a riddle. Many foreign revolutionists out of work added to the general misunderstanding their contribution of broken English in every most ingenious form of fracture. All stood ready at a moment's notice to reform everything but themselves. The general motto was: —

> "And we 'll *talk* with them, too,
> And take upon 's the mystery of things
> As if we were God's spies."

Nature is always kind enough to give even her clouds a humorous lining. I have barely hinted at the comic side of the affair, for the material was endless. This was the whistle and trailing fuse of the shell, but there was a very solid and serious kernel, full of the most deadly explosiveness. Thoughtful men divined it, but the generality suspected nothing. The word

"transcendental" then was the maid of all work for those who could not think, as "Pre-Raphaelite" has been more recently for people of the same limited housekeeping. The truth is, that there was a much nearer metaphysical relation and a much more distant æsthetic and literary relation between Carlyle and the Apostles of the Newness, as they were called in New England, than has commonly been supposed. Both represented the reaction and revolt against *Philisterei*, a renewal of the old battle begun in modern times by Erasmus and Reuchlin, and continued by Lessing, Goethe, and, in a far narrower sense, by Heine in Germany, and of which Fielding, Sterne, and Wordsworth in different ways have been the leaders in England. It was simply a struggle for fresh air, in which, if the windows could not be opened, there was danger that panes would be broken, though painted with images of saints and martyrs. Light, colored by these reverend effigies, was none the more respirable for being picturesque. There is only one thing better than tradition, and that is the original and eternal life out of which all tradition takes its rise. It was this life which the reformers demanded, with more or less clearness of consciousness and expression, life in politics, life in literature, life in religion. Of what use to import a gospel from Judæa, if we leave behind the soul that made it possible, the God who keeps

it forever real and present? Surely Abana and Pharpar *are* better than Jordan, if a living faith be mixed with those waters and none with these.

Scotch Presbyterianism as a motive of spiritual progress was dead; New England Puritanism was in like manner dead; in other words, Protestantism had made its fortune and no longer protested; but till Carlyle spoke out in the Old World and Emerson in the New, no one had dared to proclaim, *Le roi est mort: vive le roi!* The meaning of which proclamation was essentially this: the vital spirit has long since departed out of this form once so kingly, and the great seal has been in commission long enough; but meanwhile the soul of man, from which all power emanates and to which it reverts, still survives in undiminished royalty; God still survives, little as you gentlemen of the Commission seem to be aware of it, — nay, will possibly outlive the whole of you, incredible as it may appear. The truth is, that both Scotch Presbyterianism and New England Puritanism made their new avatar in Carlyle and Emerson, the heralds of their formal decease, and the tendency of the one toward Authority and of the other toward Independency might have been prophesied by whoever had studied history. The necessity was not so much in the men as in the principles they represented and the traditions

which overruled them. The Puritanism of the past found its unwilling poet in Hawthorne, the rarest creative imagination of the century, the rarest in some ideal respects since Shakespeare; but the Puritanism that cannot die, the Puritanism that made New England what it is, and is destined to make America what it should be, found its voice in Emerson. Though holding himself aloof from all active partnership in movements of reform, he has been the sleeping partner who has supplied a great part of their capital.

The artistic range of Emerson is narrow, as every well-read critic must feel at once; and so is that of Æschylus, so is that of Dante, so is that of Montaigne, so is that of Schiller, so is that of nearly every one except Shakespeare; but there is a gauge of height no less than of breadth, of individuality as well as of comprehensiveness, and, above all, there is the standard of genetic power, the test of the masculine as distinguished from the receptive minds. There are staminate plants in literature that make no fine show of fruit, but without whose pollen, quintessence of fructifying gold, the garden had been barren. Emerson's mind is emphatically one of these, and there is no man to whom our æsthetic culture owes so much. The Puritan revolt had made us ecclesiastically and the Revolution politically independent, but we were

still socially and intellectually moored to English thought, till Emerson cut the cable and gave us a chance at the dangers and the glories of blue water. No man young enough to have felt it can forget or cease to be grateful for the mental and moral *nudge* which he received from the writings of his high-minded and brave-spirited countryman. That we agree with him, or that he always agrees with himself, is aside from the question; but that he arouses in us something that we are the better for having awakened, whether that something be of opposition or assent, that he speaks always to what is highest and least selfish in us, few Americans of the generation younger than his own would be disposed to deny. His oration before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge, some thirty years ago, was an event without any former parallel in our literary annals, a scene to be always treasured in the memory for its picturesqueness and its inspiration. What crowded and breathless aisles, what windows clustering with eager heads, what enthusiasm of approval, what grim silence of foregone dissent! It was our Yankee version of a lecture by Abelard, our Harvard parallel to the last public appearances of Schelling.

I said that the Transcendental Movement was the protestant spirit of Puritanism seeking a new outlet and an escape from forms and creeds which compressed rather than expressed it. In

its motives, its preaching, and its results, it differed radically from the doctrine of Carlyle. The Scotchman, with all his genius, and his humor gigantesque as that of Rabelais, has grown shriller and shriller with years, degenerating sometimes into a common scold, and emptying very unsavory vials of wrath on the head of the sturdy British Socrates of worldly common sense. The teaching of Emerson tended much more exclusively to self-culture and the independent development of the individual man. It seemed to many almost Pythagorean in its voluntary seclusion from commonwealth affairs. Both Carlyle and Emerson were disciples of Goethe, but Emerson in a far truer sense; and while the one, from his bias toward the eccentric, has degenerated more and more into mannerism, the other has clarified steadily toward perfection of style, — exquisite fineness of material, unobtrusive lowness of tone and simplicity of fashion, the most high-bred garb of expression. Whatever may be said of his thought, nothing can be finer than the delicious limpidness of his phrase. If it was ever questionable whether democracy could develop a gentleman, the problem has been affirmatively solved at last. Carlyle, in his cynicism and his admiration of force in and for itself, has become at last positively inhuman; Emerson, reverencing strength, seeking the highest outcome of the individual, has found that society

and politics are also main elements in the attainment of the desired end, and has drawn steadily manward and worldward. The two men represent respectively those grand personifications in the drama of Æschylus, Βία and Κράτος.

Among the pistillate plants kindled to fruitage by the Emersonian pollen, Thoreau is thus far the most remarkable ; and it is something eminently fitting that his posthumous works should be offered us by Emerson, for they are strawberries from his own garden. A singular mixture of varieties, indeed, there is ; — alpine, some of them, with the flavor of rare mountain air ; others wood, tasting of sunny roadside banks or shy openings in the forest ; and not a few seedlings swollen hugely by culture, but lacking the fine natural aroma of the more modest kinds. Strange books these are of his, and interesting in many ways, — instructive chiefly as showing how considerable a crop may be raised on a comparatively narrow close of mind, and how much a man may make of his life if he will assiduously follow it, though perhaps never truly finding it at last.

I have just been renewing my recollection of Mr. Thoreau's writings, and have read through his six volumes in the order of their production. I shall try to give an adequate report of their impression upon me both as critic and as mere reader. He seems to me to have been a man

with so high a conceit of himself that he accepted without questioning, and insisted on our accepting, his defects and weaknesses of character as virtues and powers peculiar to himself. Was he indolent, he finds none of the activities which attract or employ the rest of mankind worthy of him. Was he wanting in the qualities that make success, it is success that is contemptible, and not himself that lacks persistency and purpose. Was he poor, money was an unmixed evil. Did his life seem a selfish one, he condemns doing good as one of the weakest of superstitions. To be of use was with him the most killing bait of the wily tempter Uselessness. He had no faculty of generalization from outside of himself, or at least no experience which would supply the material of such, and he makes his own whim the law, his own range the horizon of the universe. He condemns a world, the hollowness of whose satisfactions he had never had the means of testing, and we recognize Apemantus behind the mask of Timon. He had little active imagination; of the receptive he had much. His appreciation is of the highest quality; his critical power, from want of continuity of mind, very limited and inadequate. He somewhere cites a simile from Ossian, as an example of the superiority of the old poetry to the new, though, even were the historic evidence less convincing, the senti-

mental melancholy of those poems should be conclusive of their modernness. He had none of the artistic mastery which controls a great work to the serene balance of completeness, but exquisite mechanical skill in the shaping of sentences and paragraphs, or (more rarely) short bits of verse for the expression of a detached thought, sentiment, or image. His works give one the feeling of a sky full of stars, — something impressive and exhilarating certainly, something high overhead and freckled thickly with spots of isolated brightness; but whether these have any mutual relation with each other, or have any concern with our mundane matters, is for the most part matter of conjecture, — astrology as yet, and not astronomy.

It is curious, considering what Thoreau afterwards became, that he was not by nature an observer. He only saw the things he looked for, and was less poet than naturalist. Till he built his Walden shanty, he did not know that the hickory grew in Concord. Till he went to Maine, he had never seen phosphorescent wood, a phenomenon early familiar to most country boys. At forty he speaks of the seeding of the pine as a new discovery, though one should have thought that its gold-dust of blowing pollen might have earlier drawn his eye. Neither his attention nor his genius was of the spontaneous kind. He discovered nothing.

He thought everything a discovery of his own, from moonlight to the planting of acorns and nuts by squirrels. This is a defect in his character, but one of his chief charms as a writer. Everything grows fresh under his hand. He delved in his mind and nature; he planted them with all manner of native and foreign seeds, and reaped assiduously. He was not merely solitary, he would be isolated, and succeeded at last in almost persuading himself that he was autochthonous. He valued everything in proportion as he fancied it to be exclusively his own. He complains in "Walden" that there is no one in Concord with whom he could talk of Oriental literature, though the man was living within two miles of his hut who had introduced him to it. This intellectual selfishness becomes sometimes almost painful in reading him. He lacked that generosity of "communication" which Johnson admired in Burke. De Quincey tells us that Wordsworth was impatient when any one else spoke of mountains, as if he had a peculiar property in them. And we can readily understand why it should be so: no one is satisfied with another's appreciation of his mistress. But Thoreau seems to have prized a lofty way of thinking (often we should be inclined to call it a remote one) not so much because it was good in itself as because he wished few to share it with

him. It seems now and then as if he did not seek to lure others up "above our lower region of turmoil," but to leave his own name cut on the mountain peak as the first climber. This itch of originality infects his thought and style. To be misty is not to be mystic. He turns commonplaces end for end, and fancies it makes something new of them. As we walk down Park Street, our eye is caught by Dr. Winship's dumb-bells, one of which bears an inscription testifying that it is the heaviest ever put up at arm's length by any athlete; and in reading Mr. Thoreau's books we cannot help feeling as if he sometimes invited our attention to a particular sophism or paradox as the biggest yet maintained by any single writer. He seeks, at all risks, for perversity of thought, and revives the age of *concetti* while he fancies himself going back to a pre-classical nature. "A day," he says, "passed in the society of those Greek sages, such as described in the 'Banquet' of Xenophon, would not be comparable with the dry wit of decayed cranberry-vines and the fresh Attic salt of the moss-beds." It is not so much the True that he loves as the Out-of-the-Way. As the Brazen Age shows itself in other men by exaggeration of phrase, so in him by extravagance of statement. He wishes always to trump your suit and to *ruff* when you least expect it. Do you love Nature because she is beautiful?

He will find a better argument in her ugliness. Are you tired of the artificial man? He instantly dresses you up an ideal in a Penobscot Indian, and attributes to this creature of his otherwise-mindedness as peculiarities things that are common to all woodsmen, white or red, and this simply because he has not studied the pale-faced variety.

This notion of an absolute originality, as if one could have a patent-right in it, is an absurdity. A man cannot escape in thought, any more than he can in language, from the past and the present. As no one ever invents a word, and yet language somehow grows by general contribution and necessity, so it is with thought. Mr. Thoreau seems to me to insist in public on going back to flint and steel, when there is a match-box in his pocket which he knows very well how to use at a pinch. Originality consists in power of digesting and assimilating thoughts, so that they become part of our life and substance. Montaigne, for example, is one of the most original of authors, though he helped himself to ideas in every direction. But they turn to blood and coloring in his style, and give a freshness of complexion that is forever charming. In Thoreau much seems yet to be foreign and unassimilated, showing itself in symptoms of indigestion. A preacher-up of Nature, we now and then detect

under the surly and stoic garb something of the sophist and the sentimentalizer. I am far from implying that this was conscious on his part. But it is much easier for a man to impose on himself when he measures only with himself. A greater familiarity with ordinary men would have done Thoreau good, by showing him how many fine qualities are common to the race. The radical vice of his theory of life was that he confounded physical with spiritual remoteness from men. A man is far enough withdrawn from his fellows if he keep himself clear of their weaknesses. He is not so truly withdrawn as exiled, if he refuse to share in their strength. "Solitude," says Cowley, "can be well fitted and set right but upon a very few persons. They must have enough knowledge of the world to see the vanity of it, and enough virtue to despise all vanity." It is a morbid self-consciousness that pronounces the world of men empty and worthless before trying it, the instinctive evasion of one who is sensible of some innate weakness, and retorts the accusation of it before any has made it but himself. To a healthy mind, the world is a constant challenge of opportunity. Mr. Thoreau had not a healthy mind, or he would not have been so fond of prescribing. His whole life was a search for the doctor. The old mystics had a wiser sense of what the world was worth. They

ordained a severe apprenticeship to law, and even ceremonial, in order to the gaining of freedom and mastery over these. Seven years of service for Rachel were to be rewarded at last with Leah. Seven other years of faithfulness with her were to win them at last the true bride of their souls. Active Life was with them the only path to the Contemplative.

Thoreau had no humor, and this implies that he was a sorry logician. Himself an artist in rhetoric, he confounds thought with style when he undertakes to speak of the latter. He was forever talking of getting away from the world, but he must be always near enough to it, nay, to the Concord corner of it, to feel the impression he makes there. He verifies the shrewd remark of Sainte-Beuve, "On touche encore à son temps et très-fort, même quand on le repousse." This egotism of his is a Stylites pillar after all, a seclusion which keeps him in the public eye. The dignity of man is an excellent thing, but therefore to hold one's self too sacred and precious is the reverse of excellent. There is something delightfully absurd in six volumes addressed to a world of such "vulgar fellows" as Thoreau affirmed his fellow men to be. I once had a glimpse of a genuine solitary who spent his winters one hundred and fifty miles beyond all human communication, and there dwelt with his rifle as his only confidant. Compared with

this, the shanty on Walden Pond has something the air, it must be confessed, of the Hermitage of La Chevrette. I do not believe that the way to a true cosmopolitanism carries one into the woods or the society of musquashes. Perhaps the narrowest provincialism is that of Self; that of Kleinwinkel is nothing to it. The natural man, like the singing birds, comes out of the forest as inevitably as the natural bear and the wildcat stick there. To seek to be natural implies a consciousness that forbids all naturalness forever. It is as easy — and no easier — to be natural in a salon as in a swamp, if one do not aim at it, for what we call unnaturalness always has its spring in a man's thinking too much about himself. "It is impossible," said Turgot, "for a vulgar man to be simple."

I look upon a great deal of the modern sentimentalism about Nature as a mark of disease. It is one more symptom of the general liver-complaint. To a man of wholesome constitution the wilderness is well enough for a mood or a vacation, but not for a habit of life. Those who have most loudly advertised their passion for seclusion and their intimacy with Nature, from Petrarch down, have been mostly sentimentalists, unreal men, misanthropes on the spindle side, solacing an uneasy suspicion of themselves by professing contempt for their kind. They make demands on the world in advance propor-

tioned to their inward measure of their own merit, and are angry that the world pays only by the visible measure of performance. It is true of Rousseau, the modern founder of the sect, true of Saint Pierre, his intellectual child, and of Châteaubriand, his grandchild, the inventor, we might almost say, of the primitive forest, and who first was touched by the solemn falling of a tree from natural decay in the windless silence of the woods. It is a very shallow view that affirms trees and rocks to be healthy, and cannot see that men in communities are just as true to the laws of their organization and destiny; that can tolerate the puffin and the fox, but not the fool and the knave; that would shun politics because of its demagogues, and snuff up the stench of the obscene fungus. The divine life of Nature is more wonderful, more various, more sublime in man than in any other of her works, and the wisdom that is gained by commerce with men, as Montaigne and Shakespeare gained it, or with one's own soul among men, as Dante, is the most delightful, as it is the most precious, of all. In outward nature it is still man that interests us, and we care far less for the things seen than the way in which they are seen by poetic eyes like Wordsworth's or Thoreau's, and the reflections they cast there. To hear the to-do that is often made over

the simple fact that a man sees the image of himself in the outward world, one is reminded of a savage when he for the first time catches a glimpse of himself in a looking-glass. "Venerable child of Nature," we are tempted to say, "to whose science in the invention of the tobacco-pipe, to whose art in the tattooing of thine undegenerate hide not yet enslaved by tailors, we are slowly striving to climb back, the miracle thou beholdest is sold in my unhappy country for a shilling!" If matters go on as they have done, and everybody must needs blab of all the favors that have been done him by roadside and river-brink and woodland walk, as if to kiss and tell were no longer treachery, it will be a positive refreshment to meet a man who is as superbly indifferent to Nature as she is to him. By and by we shall have John Smith, of No. –12 –12th Street, advertising that he is not the J. S. who saw a cow-lily on Thursday last, as he never saw one in his life, would not see one if he could, and is prepared to prove an alibi on the day in question.

Solitary communion with Nature does not seem to have been sanitary or sweetening in its influence on Thoreau's character. On the contrary, his letters show him more cynical as he grew older. While he studied with respectful attention the minks and woodchucks, his neighbors,

he looked with utter contempt on the august drama of destiny of which his country was the scene, and on which the curtain had already risen. He was converting us back to a state of nature "so eloquently," as Voltaire said of Rousseau, "that he almost persuaded us to go on all fours," while the wiser fates were making it possible for us to walk erect for the first time. Had he conversed more with his fellows, his sympathies would have widened with the assurance that his peculiar genius had more appreciation, and his writings a larger circle of readers, or at least a warmer one, than he dreamed of. We have the highest testimony [1] to the natural sweetness, sincerity, and nobleness of his temper, and in his books an equally irrefragable one to the rare quality of his mind. He was not a strong thinker, but a sensitive feeler. Yet his mind strikes us as cold and wintry in its purity. A light snow has fallen everywhere in which he seems to come on the track of the shier sensations that would elsewhere leave no trace. We think greater compression would have done more for his fame. A feeling of sameness comes over us as we read so much. Trifles are recorded with an over-minute punctuality and conscientiousness of detail. He registers the state of his personal thermometer thirteen times a day. We

[1] Mr. Emerson, in the Biographical Sketch prefixed to the *Excursions*.

cannot help thinking sometimes of the man who

> "Watches, starves, freezes, and sweats —
> To learn but catechisms and alphabets
> Of unconcerning things, matters of fact,"

and sometimes of the saying of the Persian poet, that "when the owl would boast, he boasts of catching mice at the edge of a hole." We could readily part with some of his affectations. It was well enough for Pythagoras to say, once for all, "When I was Euphorbus at the siege of Troy"; not so well for Thoreau to travesty it into "When I was a shepherd on the plains of Assyria." A naïve thing said over again is anything but naïve. But with every exception, there is no writing comparable with Thoreau's in kind, that is comparable with it in degree where it is best; where it disengages itself, that is, from the tangled roots and dead leaves of a second-hand Orientalism, and runs limpid and smooth and broadening as it runs, a mirror for whatever is grand and lovely in both worlds.

George Sand says neatly, that "Art is not a study of positive reality" (*actuality* were the fitter word), "but a seeking after ideal truth." It would be doing very inadequate justice to Thoreau if we left it to be inferred that this ideal element did not exist in him, and that too in larger proportion, if less obtrusive, than his nature-worship. He took nature as the moun-

tain-path to an ideal world. If the path wind a good deal, if he record too faithfully every trip over a root, if he botanize somewhat wearisomely, he gives us now and then superb outlooks from some jutting crag, and brings us out at last into an illimitable ether, where the breathing is not difficult for those who have any true touch of the climbing spirit. His shanty-life was a mere impossibility, so far as his own conception of it goes, as an entire independency of mankind. The tub of Diogenes had a sounder bottom. Thoreau's experiment actually presupposed all that complicated civilization which it theoretically abjured. He squatted on another man's land; he borrows an axe; his boards, his nails, his bricks, his mortar, his books, his lamp, his fish-hooks, his plough, his hoe, all turn state's evidence against him as an accomplice in the sin of that artificial civilization which rendered it possible that such a person as Henry D. Thoreau should exist at all. *Magnis tamen excidit ausis.* His aim was a noble and a useful one, in the direction of "plain living and high thinking." It was a practical sermon on Emerson's text that "things are in the saddle and ride mankind," an attempt to solve Carlyle's problem (condensed from Johnson) of "lessening your denominator." His whole life was a rebuke of the waste and aimlessness of our American luxury, which is an abject enslavement to tawdry

upholstery. He had "fine translunary things" in him. His better style as a writer is in keeping with the simplicity and purity of his life. We have said that his range was narrow, but to be a master is to be a master. He had caught his English at its living source, among the poets and prose-writers of its best days; his literature was extensive and recondite; his quotations are always nuggets of the purest ore: there are sentences of his as perfect as anything in the language, and thoughts as clearly crystallized; his metaphors and images are always fresh from the soil; he had watched Nature like a detective who is to go upon the stand; as we read him, it seems as if all-out-of-doors had kept a diary and become its own Montaigne; we look at the landscape as in a Claude Lorraine glass; compared with his, all other books of similar aim, even White's "Selborne," seem dry as a country clergyman's meteorological journal in an old almanac. He belongs with Donne and Browne and Novalis; if not with the originally creative men, with the scarcely smaller class who are peculiar, and whose leaves shed their invisible thought-seed like ferns.

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